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## Creating Hard-working, Responsible Parents: A New Labour Structure of Feeling?

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# **Creating Hard-working, Responsible Parents: A New Labour**

## **Structure of Feeling?**

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**Submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the discipline of Social**

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## Thesis abstract

This thesis uses and extends Raymond Williams' (1961; 1977) structure of feeling approach to locate a mood about parenting during the New Labour years, and to consider what this approach can reveal about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' lives. It adapts the structure of feeling approach in two particular ways: by including interviews alongside policy and popular cultural sources; and by extending the notion of feeling to include personal feelings and their interaction with the wider public mood. These adaptations were particularly relevant for a subject as personal as parenting, and for a cultural context which placed so much attention on the personal and personal responsibilities for monitoring and supervising the self (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999). In locating and analysing the structure of feeling, the thesis draws on the concepts of ideological dilemmas and interpretative repertoires which have been described as a range of competing ideologies that make up beliefs, values, practices and wisdoms of particular cultures, and a range of different rhetorical resources people have available to them to discuss and make sense of the dilemmas (Billig, 2001; Edley, 2001). In identifying three particular dilemmas – about the gendered nature of parenting, expertise about parenting, and work in the context of parenting – the thesis locates dominant and alternative ideas about parenting which point to a structure of feeling that is full of contestation which is managed through discourses of 'choice' and 'what works'. The thesis explores the personal responsibilities placed on parents for managing these dilemmas and the strategies they deploy to do this, and reveals that these strategies can vary according to parents' personal dispositions but also their social positionings. This thesis demonstrates the usefulness and significance of the structure of feeling approach for locating and understanding social inequalities and their (lack of) transformation in a cultural era emphasising the personal and personal responsibility.

## **1. Becoming a parent during the New Labour years: personal and political entanglements**

Having a child, particularly for the first time, and becoming a parent marks a major personal transition in life and is often a deeply significant experience. But how might this experience be affected by a political and public context that has much to say about parenting and child development and which is characterised by a sense of anxiety (Furedi, 2002; Hendrick, 2003; MacLeod, 2004; Kehily, 2010)? This question was formative in the development of my thesis research which explores how the personal and political dynamics of becoming a parent became entangled during the New Labour years (1997 – 2010). In this introductory chapter I discuss the significance of my focus on parenting during the New Labour years and my interest in the relationship between policy and personal life in relation to parenting. I also outline the role of popular culture in this relationship and my rationale for including this in my analysis. The chapter then turns to a discussion of Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach that I developed to refine and address my specific research questions. These questions are:

- What does a study of policy, popular culture and personal accounts suggest about a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years?
- And how might the structure of feeling approach enrich understandings about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives?

### **The significance of parenting during the New Labour years**

Parenting has long been a site of intense Government interest and intervention. The period of examination in this study is the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first, which is a time defined by and corresponding with the years of the New Labour governments (1997 – 2010). During this period, children – and, as a direct result, parents and their parenting – were

made a central aspect of New Labour's political vision and policy initiatives. A key reason for this was that children were seen as investments potentially able to offer so much for the future, for all our futures, in what was referred to as the 'social investment' welfare state (Giddens, 1998; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Lister, 2006). Such a focus promoted children as the hope for a 'better' future – an idea born out of a perceived sense of crisis about childhood and family life during this era (see Hendrick, 2003; Hughes and Cooke, 2007; Kehily, 2010). As Hendrick articulated:

On the one hand, happy (innocent) children, playing 'nice' games constructively in domestic gardens or other regulated spaces, being hailed indoors by caring and responsible parents for properly balanced meals; young adolescents returning from appropriately organised recreational activities, or after having helped repaint the local community centre, loud but not too loud, jostling one another along the pavement, but not excessively so, and soon settling down in the quiet of their bedroom to do their homework, with mum and dad on hand to offer encouragement and guidance. Nothing disturbs the peace except the sound of a crying baby, attended by a mother who has magically combined her family obligations with her participation in the labour market. And in the evening, homes are lit up, not to keep burglars at bay (for burglary is a thing of the past) but to illuminate the rays of warm domesticity and family togetherness; and looking out of the window, a neighbour will be seen crossing the street to check on the elderly couple who have not been too good since that bout of 'flu earlier in the year. Dogs are panting as they await their nightly ritual and the cats sit on front door mats, musing on the dialectics of existence. All's quiet on the New Labour Front.

On the other hand, 'Fronts' have a history of erupting and spilling blood. Community, in the rough and tumble of its real life is often full of conflict and disagreement at best, and at worst personal selfishness and insidious intolerance towards marginalised groups. But these vices are well hidden, whereas children – remember the 'feral' gangs in

the media's imagination – are so easily identified as the spoilers for they are visible, mobile, noisy and threatening in their physicality, their graffiti messages and their street pleasures. This has always been the case. Thus, for New Labour, *their* socialisation is essential, since in a way the government is correct in emphasising the role and influence of children in communities: they *do* provide a heart and soul – a sense of continuity with a past and a looking forward to the future (of course, this is an adult perspective in that children serve to make human what would otherwise be barren landscape). But, at the same time, the very nature of the 'anarchic' child in the community is what gives rise to tension and conflict: adults wish children to be corralled in an imaginative world where childhood is fixed and submissive, whereas children as real people disrupt those worlds, as they have always done. (Hendrick, 2003: 246-7)

This quotation, which demonstrates political hopes and interrelated fears, highlights contradictory images of children in New Labour's political thinking and makes visible some of the reasons why New Labour placed emphasis on children in its political rhetoric and policy initiatives. Whilst New Labour's concern focused on the whole of childhood – developing initiatives, for example, in relation to teenagers and anti-social behaviour (MacLeod, 2004; DfES, 2006; Margo and Dixon, 2006) – it gave particular policy emphasis to the early years of childhood (see, for example, DfES, 2003). This was because of research evidence suggesting that experiences during the first three years of a child's life were critical for development and for the formation of their future personalities, behaviour patterns and learning dispositions (see, for example, Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000; Zigler, Finn-Stevenson and Hall, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004).

New Labour's interest in children coincided with, but also contributed to, a climate of public anxiety about parenting and among parents themselves. As Mary MacLeod (2004: 5), then Director of the Families and Parenting Institute, argued, 'parents appear to worry much more than before about how to be a parent'; something she suggested was fuelled by the amount of public attention



about parenting which would ‘astound previous generations who, whatever their private anxieties, did not experience constant public conversations about how parents fail’ (*ibid*; see also Furedi, 2002). Such a statement overlooks the intense regulation and surveillance that some parents have long experienced (see, for example, Williams, 1989; Bock and Thane, 1991), but it nevertheless points to the degree of attention placed on parenting in relation to *all* parents that had taken hold by the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first (see also Hughes and Cooke, 2007). The public attention given to parenting could be explained, in part, by what Furedi (2002) has termed ‘parental determinism’ in which good or bad parenting was seen as the key determinant in the behaviour and development of children. In this context, New Labour’s policies and initiatives focusing on parenting were concerned with supporting parents to bring up their children ‘well’ and to encourage and, if necessary, to coerce parents to take up personal responsibilities for fulfilling economic and moral expectations associated with ‘good’ parenting (see Featherstone, 2004; Gillies, 2005, 2007; MacLeod, 2004; Williams, 2005). These involved parental participation in paid employment, and making time to focus on the well-being and development of their child – responsibilities I set out further in chapter two.

Another reason for Government interest in parenting emerged from New Labour’s interest in developing policies to better facilitate parents to combine labour market participation with caring for their children. The significance of this policy focus was highlighted by Fiona Williams who commented that:

Encouraging and rewarding parental involvement in employment has been a central element in New Labour’s family policy: it has been part of a strategy of combating poverty, especially for lone parents and other low-income families; of encouraging economic self-provisioning (for housing, pensions, care services); as embodying the shift away from a male breadwinner model for welfare; as the basis for a prosperous and economically competitive nation; and as the role model parents can provide for their children. (Williams, 2005: 290).

Promoting parental involvement in paid employment – of mothers as well as fathers – was therefore a key part of New Labour's focus on parents and parenting because of the ways in which paid work spoke to a number of its agendas and concerns. These included concerns about poverty and welfare dependency, but also changing ideas and experiences of the gendered dynamics of parenting.

New Labour made parents and parenting the subject of much political rhetoric as seen through phrases and sound bites such as 'hard-working families' and 'responsible parents'; and it developed a range of policies to better support parents including parental leave, parental rights to request flexible working, affordable child care, and the extension of midwife and health visitor services (see Home Office, 1998; DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007). This demonstrates some of the significance attached to parenting during the New Labour years.

### **Relating the personal and political of becoming a parent**

Wetherell (1995: 215) has noted that 'to become a mother or father in whatever type of family context is to acquire a new set of experiences, a new set of relationships and a new sense of self'. She claimed that becoming a parent, particularly for the first time, involves having to deal with the physical and emotional demands associated with parenting; the work of establishing a relationship with the new child; and negotiating changing relationships with the other parent if in a couple relationship, as well as changing relationships with significant others in parents' lives (see also Miller, 2005; Thompson et al, 2011). Added to this, first time parents also have to re-define who they are and what they should do and feel in a context of deeply gendered ideas associated with parenting. These observations suggest something of the intensity and personal nature of the experience of becoming a parent, but also point to the relational, familial and social contexts in which these transitions take place. So what, then, might the New Labour political context have meant for this personal transition?



Furedi (2002) has suggested that alongside, and because of, the idea of parental determinism there was a sense among many parents that they had lost confidence in their abilities to parent. This, he argued, meant that experiences of parenting were often characterised by fear, anxiety and paranoia. His claims, and the claims of MacLeod which I mentioned earlier, alerted me to potential interactions and entanglements of the political and personal of parenting during the New Labour years that I wanted to explore. My interest in these entanglements was further fuelled by my awareness of New Labour's philosophical approach promoting the idea that people could, and should, be supported to take personal responsibility for working through the various issues and challenges they encountered (see Giddens, 1998).

With this in mind, a central question shaping my research was one about how personal experiences of becoming a parent might have been shaped by – but also shaping of – New Labour's policy developments. This interest was influenced by work exploring the mutual constitution of policy and personal lives (see Lewis and Fink, 2004a; 2004b) – an approach which sought to move beyond a historic dualism between understandings of structure and agency (see also Hollway, 2007: 27). In this approach people are not seen as being completely determined by the social structures in which they are located; nor are they seen as autonomous agents capable of acting according to their own individual free will. Instead, the relationship between individuals and society is viewed as one of interaction and co-production. In the context of relationships between policy and personal lives, it has been argued that policy frames and shapes, in part, personal lives; but that people are not simply social dupes and that they offer reflexive, reasoned and negotiated responses. This was a central claim of the work of Clarke, Newman and colleagues (2007) in a study of citizen-consumers and changing public services. They argued that 'people are not just addressed or summoned by dominant discourses – but also "answer back" in various and sometimes unexpected ways' (Clarke et al, 2007: 142). This suggests that parents' personal lives are deeply influenced by and constituted through dominant discourses including policy; but that in offering varied responses, parents are also

active in the development and direction of policy itself. In other words, this relationship is *dialogic* (see Holquist, 1990; Holland and Lave, 2001; Maybin, 2001).

### **The role of popular culture in the personal and political of parenting**

In thinking about the relationship between policy and personal lives in the context of parenting during the New Labour years, it became clear, however, that this was not simply a two way dialogue. Few parents keep up with specific policy developments and even fewer parents read policy documents (and those that do are unlikely to be reading them *as parents*). Politicians and policy makers, too, rarely have direct contact with all kinds of parents. It is therefore through the media and popular culture that parents and policy makers can derive a lot of knowledge of each other, and of prevailing sensibilities about parenting. Popular culture was therefore a significant mediator in the relationship between parents and policy makers during the New Labour years.

A huge array of parenting books, magazines, television programmes such as *Supernanny*, and interactive websites like *Mumsnet* were available to parents during this time which all offered parents various forms of advice and support. In a historical exploration of child care advice, Hardyment (2007) suggested that there had been a significant rise in parenting books and magazines since the 1980s. And in commenting on the range and scope of advice and information for parents in popular culture, MacLeod (2004) said that parents were increasingly ‘bombarded’. Policy makers were also subjected to this cultural outpouring – an outpouring which inevitably formed and shaped the development of policy. For example, as Beverley Hughes MP, then UK Minister for Children, Young People and Families said in a speech about parenting,

Government too must extend the opportunities for parents to develop their expertise; the popularity of *Supernanny* exemplifies the hunger for information and for effective parenting



programmes that parents often express to me. (Beverley Hughes, MP, keynote speech, IPPR, July 2006, cited in Gill and Jensen, 2008)

In this quotation, Hughes made a direct link between ideas about parenting that were expressed on *Supernanny* and in New Labour policy approaches. This direct link could also be seen with policy and interactive websites such as *Mumsnet* in which politicians would engage in online conversations with parents and make reference to these in the subsequent development of their policies (see Gambles, 2010a).

As well as the cultural bombardment of information about parenting that influenced policy and personal experiences of parenting, popular culture and the wider cultural context during the New Labour years was also one that emphasised corresponding notions of personal responsibility. Nikolas Rose (1999) argued, for example, that the late twentieth century had given rise to a therapeutic culture of the self in which people learned to monitor, supervise and take care of themselves. As Gill (2007: 171) explained, this was a way of being that was 'perfectly suited to neo-liberal democracies where discourses of structural inequality of power difference are fast disappearing and individuals are exhorted to live their lives through notions of autonomy, self-reinvention and limitless choice'. This therapeutic culture of personal monitoring and self-reinvention was a dominant idea within much popular culture of the New Labour years (see Orgad, 2005; Gill, 2007; see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008a, 2008b who extend this to a US context). This demonstrates how popular culture, in its various forms, was bound up with personal and political entanglements of parenting during the period. Moreover, it suggests that popular culture not only mediated the relationship between policy and personal lives but that it also shaped and constituted it (Gambles, 2010a; Gambles, 2010b).

In light of all this, I became fascinated by the question of how policy, personal lives and popular culture were all entangled in understandings and experiences of becoming a parent and a number of questions emerged: how might policy and popular culture have interacted to create

particular ideals and expectations about parenting? What happened when ideals in policy and in popular culture contradicted each other? How might such ideals have been taken up, ignored or reshaped by parents in their everyday practices? And what, or who, was legitimised, silenced or marginalised through these processes and with what implications? These questions were huge, not least because the subject of parenting itself had become one of such tremendous political and personal significance. It was therefore necessary to think about ways to focus and manage my research interests – and this was where Raymond Williams’ structure of feeling approach came in.

### **The structure of feeling approach**

My research made use of Raymond Williams’ structure of feeling approach – an approach which pays attention to and emphasises the multitude of forces that come together to create particular wisdoms, feelings and sensibilities of particular times about particular issues (Williams, 1961; 1977). Structure of feeling is a concept that seeks to capture a ‘mood, sensibility or atmosphere associated with a specific period or generation’ (Lewis and Fink, 2004a: 58) and it has been described as something referring to ‘the actual living sense of a culture’ where ‘official consciousness of a period, as codified in legislation and doctrine, interacts with the lived experiences of that period, and defines the set of perceptions and values common to a generation’ (Macey, 2000: 366).

This structure is one which contains multiple forces – what Williams (1977) referred to as dominant, residual and emergent – which interact and come up against each other to create particular understandings and tensions that frame and characterise the mood of a time. For Williams, the dominant is a ‘lived system of meanings and values’ and ‘a sense of reality for most people in the society...beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move’ (Williams, 1977: 110). Yet he argued that there are always alternative movements and ideas – residual and emergent – within and beyond the dominant which, together, constitute a more



nuanced, ambiguous and contingent mood of the period in question. The idea of structure of feeling as something which contains contradictory ideas speaks to the way in which Clarke has sought to conceptualise 'the social':

The social...is a contested terrain in its own right – subjected to multiple and conflicting attempts at 'mapping' places, positions, relations and differences (and all the inequalities that such differences may distribute). Some of these mappings are governmental – the official classifications, distinctions, locations used to constitute populations. But the social is also a field of resources – identities, potential solidarities, languages and voices – with which the subjected and subordinated may 'answer back' to the dominant and would-be hegemonic 'hailings' of authority. (Clarke, 2005: 14)

So, like the social, a structure of feeling is something that is contested *because* it contains multiple and conflicting messages and attempts to map out the terrain of social and personal life. These messages come from policy as well as a myriad of other sources including popular culture. But, like the social, a structure of feeling is also something that is contested because people experiencing life through it respond to and shape it through the variety of personal and social resources they have available to them. For a subject matter as broad, heated and contested as parenting during the New Labour years, a concept which held on to and emphasised multiple, contradictory claims and forces was particularly useful.

Williams coined and developed the concept to explore and locate the cultural context associated with a particular period or issue which, he argued, was 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests' yet something 'which operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity' (Williams, 1961: 64). And for Williams, structure of feeling was both a theoretical concept and a methodological approach in which cultural texts such as legislation or policy as well as novels, newspapers and magazines could be read alongside each other to reveal the nuanced, contradictory and dynamic mood of particular periods (Williams, 1961: 70). Clarke et al (1998: 7) have noted that

‘most cultural analysts have avoided the phrase because of its ambiguous, if not paradoxical, character: the words “structure” and “feeling” do not sit obviously or comfortably together’. Yet Clarke et al found it was a particularly useful concept ‘precisely because it combines these two aspects’ (*ibid*). It is the bringing together of ‘structure’ and ‘feeling’ that I also found so compelling. Indeed, the structure of feeling approach connects and invites attention to the multiple and contradictory forms within and between social institutions including social policy and popular culture, and to the ways in which the meanings and ambiguities they promote might constitute personal lives.

But what of the specific ways in which actual lived experiences and feelings of people might also play a part in the constitution of the structure of feeling? This was something Williams himself did not make central to his analysis – something that was unsurprising given his focus on cultural texts. Yet attention to the experiences and feelings of parents seemed particularly critical in attempting to locate a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years because of the cultural emphasis on the personal and notions of personal responsibility during this period that I discussed earlier. Lewis and Fink (2004a: 59 – 60) have suggested that while people are called upon to ‘identify with, and make their own, a set of normalised and subject positions and practices of everyday living’ that correspond with dominant ideas found within a structure of feeling, there are always alternative ideals and ways of being within and beyond dominant ideas which highlights and opens up contestation. Indeed, through this research, I argue that a key reason why the structure of feeling approach, as I have adapted it, is particularly useful for policy studies because it invites and encourages attention to a more nuanced reading of public and political sentiments by recognising the ways in which these feed into and interact with personal feelings, experiences and dispositions.

The significance of the personal and personal feelings was emphasised for me through my own personal experience of becoming a parent in the midst of this research. As I was carrying out this research, my husband and I experienced three miscarriages followed by a successful pregnancy



and the birth of our first child. In writing various papers and this PhD manuscript, I wondered how much I should dwell on my personal experiences of parenting: what would seem appropriate; and what would be seen as too personal for discussion? Yet it was my very personal engagement with parenting, and all the feelings, emotions and anxieties that came with it, which deepened my understanding of the topic. Moreover, it was my personal engagement with parenting that furthered my commitment to a feminist politics that emphasised the connectivity of the personal and political and the importance of considering their mutual constitution. My personal engagement with parenting also led me to develop Williams' idea of structure of feeling at a theoretical and conceptual level. When Williams' wrote of a structure of feeling he was talking about a collective mood or feeling of a generation or period. While I use this meaning, through my various data sources I also consider feelings at a more personal and emotional level, and so explore further the ways in which a public mood is one that also penetrates and is shaped by personal and intimate feelings and dispositions.

### **Outline of the thesis**

I have found Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach to be a particularly rich framework for positioning my research – and my research focus to be a particularly rich topic for developing the structure of feeling approach. This is demonstrated in the chapters to come. In chapter two I draw on a range of policy and popular cultural texts alongside relevant academic research to map the political and public context about parenting during the New Labour years. This enables me to contextualise my research questions. The chapter demonstrates a context of multiple and conflicting forces which, in itself, enabled me to begin locating a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour period. Moreover, it enabled me to refine my research questions about what this structure of feeling about parenting might have been; and what this might have suggested about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' lives. In chapter three, I discuss further the theory

and methodology underpinning my research. I explain, more fully, the ways in which I have utilised and extended Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach and the various data sources I made use of in addressing my research questions. These include selected policy and popular cultural texts and interviews with parents. In analysing these sources I draw on the concepts of ideological dilemmas and interpretative repertoires: ideological dilemmas have been described as a range of competing ideologies that make up beliefs, values, practices and wisdoms of particular cultures; whilst interpretative repertoires refer to the range of different rhetorical resources people have available to them to discuss and make sense of these dilemmas (Billig, 2001; Edley, 2001). In chapter three I suggest that ideological dilemmas and interpretative repertoires that are part of these are useful devices for pointing to and analysing the multiple, contradictory forces that made up a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years.

My analysis of policy, popular culture and personal accounts revealed three ideological dilemmas which I make use of in chapters four, five and six to tease out and explore the structure of feeling. These particular chapters are structured in such a way that emphasise the evolving and slippery nature of parenting and the changing and developing child – the idea that what parents experience and learn never stays still and that there will always be something else to turn their attention to. Chapter four considers the negotiation of the parental role in a deeply contested gendered context; chapter five focuses on experiences of infant feeding and the daily management of parenting; and chapter six explores parental attempts to manage expectations and assumptions about work.

So, chapter four focuses on the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting and the ways in which ideas of gender neutrality and gender specificity jostled alongside each other in uncomfortable and ambiguous ways during the New Labour years. It demonstrates the degree of contestation and uncertainty about this dilemma and parental attempts to manage it. Chapter five looks at the ideological dilemma about expertise in the context of parenting and the ways in which



parents negotiated dilemmas about external sources of expertise with that of parental intuition and personal expertise. This chapter works with examples about feeding an infant and about parental styles relating to the daily management of parenting. Through these examples, the chapter explores tensions between research evidence and policy prescriptions about 'what works' alongside personal experiences of parents about what worked for them. Chapter six considers the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting. Work often referred to participation in paid work during the New Labour years, but it could also be used to capture the work of parenting itself. In reflecting on different ideas about work and how these ideas were managed, I discuss, in particular, the gendered and classed aspects of this and the other dilemmas. This chapter also explores the work that different parents had to engage in to manage and make sense of the dilemmas. I argue that this deliberative work was a pivotal aspect of the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years which created and relied upon the idea of hard-working responsible parents.

The final chapter pulls together my analysis in chapters four, five and six and makes clear the ways in which I have addressed my two research questions. I argue that a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years was one that was full of much anxiety and unease about a myriad of issues connected with parenting, and one that called upon parents to take personal responsibility for working through this. In exploring this structure of feeling, I also suggest that this anxiety was fuelled by an emphasis on choice and 'responsibilisation' – ideas which were not always compatible with each other or with policy stipulations about 'what worked', and which contributed to the sense of anxiety and unease. In considering the dynamics making up a structure of feeling about parenting, I demonstrate how the structure of feeling approach makes visible the powerful presence of policy in *all* parents' lives. Yet I argue that the presence and position of policy can vary, in part, by personal dispositions as well as gendered, classed and other positionings of social difference. I end by considering how a structure of feeling about parenting might be changing in a new political context and what the structure of feeling approach can offer for an analysis of this and the changing political context more generally.

## **2. Parenting: the political and public context**

In a recent television series, *The British Family: Our History* (2010), journalist Kirsty Young claimed that the years 2000 to 2010 were ‘the decade in which our children came to dominate every aspect of our British family life’. Through this statement, Young was both reporting and mythologizing this period as one obsessed with children and, as a result of this, parents and their parenting. So what came together to create a context that enabled her to make this claim? In this chapter I consider how and in what ways parenting emerged during the New Labour years as an issue of such public significance as a way of situating my research questions. I chart the changing political and policy context of parenting and begin to consider how this interacted with a wider public context. In doing this a number of issues are discussed. These include concerns about child poverty, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion; the rise of women’s labour market participation, changing gender relations and dilemmas for parents about how best to combine paid work with looking after their children; a focus on enhancing child development and well-being with particular emphasis given to parenting skills; and emerging research on brain development and its implications for ideas about parenting during the first few years of a child’s life. By considering the ways in which these various issues focused attention on parenting, I locate a context that became full of tension and anxiety, but also one that was full of multiple contradictions. I suggest that these contradictions, in themselves, fuelled a sense of anxiety and unease about parenting, but also that attention to these contradictions can reveal tensions and alignments of various forces that made up a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years.

### **Child poverty, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion agendas**

When New Labour first took office in 1997, 40 per cent of children were living in poverty (Hills, 2004). This figure had risen dramatically from the late 1970s – a rise that was attributed to the range



of Conservative economic and social policy decisions taken during the 1980s and early 1990s (Alcock, 1997; Hills, 2004). As well as being a matter of economic deprivation, the rise in child poverty was also seen by New Labour as both a consequence and cause of social and moral decay (see Levitas, 1998; Gillies, 2005). These concerns had been ignited during New Labour's formative years with the murder of two year old James Bulger by two ten year old boys in a poor, run-down community. As noted by Hendrick (2003: 241):

This tragic event persuaded New Labour and many other social critics of a liberal persuasion, that, after nearly 50 years of comprehensive state welfare, the 'underclass', in the miserable setting of a poor district of Merseyside, could rear up and throw a nation into emotional turmoil. One must beware of exaggeration, but New Labour witnessed a kind of implosion of grief that pointed to a failure of civil society to manage its social life.

Hendrick suggested that 'under the impact of Bulger, as "childhood" fell apart, so New Labour began trying to put it back together again' (*ibid*); and that this led to a number of policy themes including the emphasis on parental responsibility and a range of policy developments focused on tackling child poverty, anti-social behaviour and perceived problems of social exclusion (see also Hills et al, 2002).

New Labour regarded the levels of child poverty, and the social consequences attached to it, as alarming and unacceptable and a symbol of just how much had gone wrong with society. This resulted in a pledge to tackle child poverty with Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, declaring that 'our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty, and it will take a generation. It's a 20 year mission but I believe it can be done' (Tony Blair, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1999, cited in Hendrick, 2003: 209).

In order to realise its pledge to end child poverty, New Labour introduced measures to increase the financial resources available to low income parents. These included increasing the amount of child benefit available to parents and introducing tax credits that those on low income

could claim if they had children. Crucially, it also sought to enable and incentivise parental participation in paid work. The 1998 *Supporting Families* document which set out, for the first time, New Labour's approach to supporting parents and their children, stated that:

In Britain today millions of children are being brought up in poverty, and millions of others live in families that find it hard to make ends meet. Nearly three million children are growing up in households where *no-one works*. Ending the scourge of child poverty remains a top priority for this Government. (Home Office, 1998: 20, emphasis added)

New Labour therefore developed a number of policies to 'make work pay' including the introduction of a national minimum wage and a working families tax credit to boost the incomes of low income families who were active in the labour market. It claimed, for example, that:

Many people who can work, and who want to work, are discouraged from doing so by the low rewards for working more, or even taking a job at all. People are reluctant to take work that does not pay. This poverty trap frustrates many people's ambitions to provide for themselves and their families. That is why the Government is introducing from October 1999 a new Working Families Tax Credit for working families with children. (Home Office, 1998: 21)

*Supporting Families* also placed striking emphasis on encouraging *lone mothers* to participate in paid work:

We know that it is particularly difficult for lone parents to find work. Currently in the UK only 44 per cent of lone mothers are in employment, compared to 68 per cent of mothers in couples...but research carried out for the DSS (the Department for Social Security) shows that 85 per cent of lone mothers in the UK who were not in employment said they wanted to work. (Home Office, 1998: 22)



New Labour's determination to reduce child poverty, often prevalent in lone parent households, was a key reason for encouraging lone mothers to participate in paid work. New Labour suggested that this was what many lone mothers wanted. However, this claim was strongly disputed by Duncan and Edwards (1999) who found that many lone mothers felt a stronger, moral pull towards spending time caring for their children.

While New Labour did have major concerns about the well-being of children living in poverty, Hendrick (2003) cautioned against seeing New Labour's agenda to eradicate child poverty as something that was purely altruistic. Instead, he argued that the reason for seeking to tackle child poverty was because of the range of issues at stake. These included 'the economic competitiveness of the workforce, levels of criminal activity, national mental and physical health, family cohesiveness, the quality and degree of social capital, and the social well-being of civil society' (Hendrick, 2003: 212). Previous Conservative Governments had depicted lone parents, of which the vast majority were lone mothers, as 'a threat to the fabric of society, supposedly rearing delinquent children without the guidance of a proper father, and scrounging benefits and housing off the welfare state' (Duncan et al, 1998: 238). New Labour also emphasised links between lone mothers and child poverty and the problems for society that this could cause. In the introduction to *Supporting Families*, it claimed that,

Families are under stress. The divorce rate has risen sharply. There are more children being brought up in single parent households, and there is more child poverty, often as a direct consequence of family breakdown. Rising crime and drug abuse are indirect symptoms of problems in the family. (Home Office, 1998: 2)

But while New Labour suggested links between lone parenting and child poverty, and set lone parenting up as a problem, this was not because lone and unmarried parents were necessarily viewed as the problem. Indeed, it was stated that: 'many lone parents and unmarried couples raise their children every bit as successfully as married parents' (Home Office, 1998: 2). Rather, it was the

higher incident of their unemployment and poverty that were flagged as the concern. New Labour therefore sought to focus on the behaviour of parents, particularly lone parents, emphasising the importance of their participation in paid work (see for example, Field, 1995, 1997; Deacon, 2002 for a discussion).

Gillies (2005) argued that New Labour shunned much Conservative New Right rhetoric that emphasised the 'undesirable' conduct of the 'feckless', 'workshy' 'underclass' (see Murray, 1984) and tended, instead, to adopt a communitarian discourse in which parents – of all family types – were placed at the centre of policy which would support parents to act as responsible, morally ethical agents. Underlying this approach, she argued, was 'the conviction that virtuous middle class culture (rather than middle class resources) cultivates self-sufficient, self-sustaining communities' and that 'the excluded poor are constructed as morally obliged to become part of the included poor for the sake of themselves, their children and the wider community' (Gillies, 2005: 87). While seeking to distance itself from the punitive aspects of Conservative policy, New Labour therefore sought to promote social cohesion through emphasising economic and personal obligations, including a duty to be in paid work.

The desire to reduce the numbers of 'households where no-one works' (Home Office, 1998: 20) therefore became a way of New Labour tackling problems associated with the rise of lone parents living off state benefits without moralising against their family unit per se. As *Supporting Families* stated:

Neither a 'back to basics' fundamentalism, trying to turn back the clock, nor an 'anything goes' liberalism which denies the fact that how families behave affects us all, is credible anymore. (Home Office, 1998: 5)

By working to distance itself from the previous Conservative government approaches, such as Prime Minister John Major's 'Back to Basics' campaign, and an 'anything goes liberalism' including an



acceptance of economically inactive parents, it instead promoted a *third way* (Giddens, 1998) – accepting family diversity so long as parents fulfilled particular parenting responsibilities, including the responsibility of having parent in the household in employment. This meant that lone mothers would be encouraged and enabled to be in paid work. As Duncan et al (1998: 239) argued, ‘lone mothers functioned as a symbol in the attempt to restructure social benefits towards welfare to work strategies’.

The message that ‘work offers the surest way for families to provide for themselves’ (Home Office, 1998: 24) continued throughout the New Labour years. *The Children’s Plan*, published in 2007, stated, for example, that:

For children today, parental employment provides the best sustainable route out of poverty. Families are better off in work than on benefits, both financially and in terms of health and wellbeing. And because the attitudes and expectations parents have directly shaped the aspirations of their children, the benefits of being in work pass onto the next generation. (DCFS, 2007: 35)

This shows how the economic benefits of participating in paid work had to be seen alongside its redemptive and restorative powers – in other words the social benefits for parents, their children and wider society. Participation in paid work was therefore seen as something that could not only eradicate child poverty<sup>1</sup>; it would also mitigate and heal problems of anti-social behaviour and social exclusion.

The emphasis given to parental participation in paid work as a solution to problems of poverty, inequality and social exclusion has been discussed by Clarke and Newman (2004) in their reflections on New Labour positioning itself as a ‘modern’ government. They argued that New

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<sup>1</sup> In a report by Tom MacInnes (2010) *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it was found, however, that the greatest number of children in poverty lived in households where parents were in paid work – a finding which challenged the focus on paid employment as a way to combat child poverty.

Labour sought to emphasise the 'ideal of building a consensual, inclusive society (addressing the divisions, conflicts and inequalities produced and deepened by the policies of Conservative governments)'; yet it also had a keen 'determination to continue the agenda of the neo-liberal economic reform based on the presumed requirements of a global economy' (Clarke and Newman, 2004: 54). Clarke and Newman argued that these aims sat in tension and that New Labour sought to deal with this by reducing its concern to tackle widespread social inequalities 'into a much shallower concern with social inclusion, centred upon the imagery of a nation of hard-working families' (Clarke and Newman, 2004: 63). In this context, Clarke and Newman argued that social inclusion was understood and only imagined as possible through participation in paid work.

Whilst encouraging parental participation in paid work through its 'make work pay' agenda, New Labour recognised that there was also a need to address the difficulties parents faced in combining paid work with their family care commitments. It was stated that while work offered the 'surest way for families to provide for themselves', it also took up 'time which could otherwise be committed to the family' and that 'many families find it hard to strike the right balance' and 'are suffering from intense pressures on their time' (Home Office, 1998: 24). In response to these challenges, New Labour set about introducing a range of policy initiatives to help parents find a better balance between paid work and family life including rights for parents to request flexible working and a range of parental leave options. A key reason for developing the 'work-life balance' agenda was because of the way in which it could reduce child poverty. In *Balancing Work and Family Life* New Labour claimed that:

The context in which mothers and fathers have to fulfil their responsibilities as parents has changed dramatically. More employees than ever have caring responsibilities. This pattern is likely to continue, and business needs to adapt. The Government also recognises that helping parents to balance their work and family commitments is central to meeting a



number of its policy objectives, *including its commitment to halve child poverty by 2010 and eliminate it in a generation.* (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 5, emphasis added)

Yet its 'work-life balance' agenda was also presented as being of much wider benefit:

It is in all our interests to reconcile better the demands of work and home. Families themselves benefit. Children gain from having more time with their parents. But employers can also benefit from having a more committed workforce, and from being better able to retain and recruit parents. Society as a whole can also benefit, since a better balance between work and family should lead to less reliance for care on the NHS and social services and fewer social problems such as truancy and marital breakdown. (Home Office, 1998: 24)

New Labour's 'work-life balance' agenda gathered pace over the following years, so much so that by 2007 it claimed that:

Increases in the availability of childcare, extended maternity leave rights and new rights to paternity leave, coupled with rights to request flexible working arrangements when their children are young, have all enabled more mothers and fathers to find a work-life balance that suits them. (DfES, 2007: 2)

Through these extracts it is possible to see how New Labour positioned itself as recognising and responding to the need to have parents participating in paid work whilst enabling them to balance this with the needs and activities of their family lives. However, there was no indication that, through its 'workfare' agenda, New Labour produced and shaped these work-life balance challenges. Instead, New Labour produced a narrative indicating that the vast majority of parents had been enabled to be active in paid work because of its 'make work pay' and 'work life balance' policies. These policies, *if taken up*, were positioned as equipping parents to be the 'hard-working families' New Labour desired in order to overcome problems of child poverty, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion.

## **Mothers' and fathers' dilemmas about combining paid work with caring for their children**

New Labour's 'work-life balance' agenda was not confined to parents affected by or at risk of poverty but sought to offer greater support to all parents in the context of struggles over combining paid work with caring for children. New Labour was acutely aware that a significant number of mothers and fathers, regardless of family income, were finding it difficult to juggle these activities and in recognition of this, it emphasised the importance of ensuring widespread availability of child care, flexible working and leave arrangements:

The vast majority of people raise children at some point in their working lives, and have to adjust their lives to cope...Many people want to be able to provide care within the family or to look after their children, while also benefiting from greater independence through paid employment. They often need part time work or work with flexible hours. For all these people flexible family-friendly working arrangements are essential for helping them to balance their family responsibilities with paid employment. The availability of childcare, flexible working arrangements and reasonable time off to deal with family emergencies, all contributes to making it possible for everyone to share in the social and economic benefits of work. (Home Office, 1998: 24-25)

New Labour placed much emphasis on paid work while recognising that parents also needed time and support to look after their children. This is not to say that New Labour stipulated that *all* parents should be in paid work. Indeed it stated that 'not all parents can work or wish to do so, and we support and value those parents who want to bring up their children full time' (Home Office, 1998: 22). But, as indicated in the previous section, this option was only really supported and valued in households where at least one parent worked. And over time New Labour focused less on supporting parents who did not wish to participate in paid work and more on situations in which mothers were participating in paid work and fathers were spending – or wanting to spend – more time with their children:



We have seen major changes in parental employment patterns and in the way that caring responsibilities are shared. Mothers are working more. Since 1971, the proportion of women working has increased from 56 per cent to 70 per cent. Fathers are spending more time with their children: in the late 1990s, fathers of children under 5 were spending an average two hours a day on child-related activities, compared to less than a quarter of an hour per day in the mid 1970s. (DfES, 2007: 2)

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Conservative governments had taken the view that family life was essentially a private domain and that, if at all possible, it should be a sacred space beyond the scope of government intervention (see Abbott and Wallace, 1992; George and Wilding, 1994; Fox Harding, 1996; Muncie and Wetherell, 1995). This did not mean they had nothing to say about family life – quite the opposite as seen, for example, by the emphasis placed on the importance of long lasting heterosexual marital unions (Abbott and Wallace, 1992, Fox Harding, 1996). However, the notion of family privacy was often drawn upon to justify a lack of policy support for combining paid work with family life (such as publicly funded parental leaves and child care). This earlier context led New Labour to argue that the vast majority of parents had been left alone to struggle with ‘work-life balance’ challenges. As well as contributing to a rise in child poverty, this left a number of parents who were in paid work facing many financial pressures in relation to child care costs as well as acute pressures on their time as they struggled to combine demanding jobs with family life (see Hewitt, 1993; Coote, Harman and Hewitt, 1990; Home Office, 1998). Through policies on work-life balance, child care and making work pay, New Labour therefore made it clear that policy should involve itself in family matters by helping parents to be in paid work whilst also being supported to look after their children. And, as a result of the policies it developed, New Labour sought to demonstrate that it recognised that much of what had been seen as personal and private challenges by previous Conservative Governments were actually struggles that needed public and political support. In doing this, New Labour positioned itself as a ‘modern’ Government that understood the needs of ‘modern’ families (Clarke and Newman, 2004).

A shift in perceptions and experiences of gender roles – namely, about ‘modern’ mothers taking up paid work outside the home and, albeit a little later and to a lesser extent, fathers showing more interest in participating in the care of their children – had been occurring before New Labour took office and gathered momentum during the early years of its time in government (Coote, Harman and Hewitt, 1993; Muncie et al, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Lewis, 2002; Gambles et al, 2006). The shift added to the sense that many mothers and fathers were finding it difficult to balance their paid work and family commitments. And by 2000, with the launch of New Labour’s Work-Life Balance Campaign that sought to encourage workplaces to offer more family-friendly employment (see DfEE, 2000), ‘work-life balance’ had become an issue that was attracting significant public interest and discussion. In newspapers, magazines, on talk shows and in the pages of parenting manuals of the time, it became increasingly impossible to ignore discussion of ‘work-life balance’ challenges facing parents, particularly mothers.

In this context, Allison Pearson wrote a best-selling novel, *I Don’t Know How She Does It* (2003), which spoke to work-life balance dilemmas and the anxieties and ambivalences that were felt. This novel, which I draw on to illustrate the wider public sense of anxiety about ‘work-life balance’ challenges, focused on the experiences of Kate Reddy, a mother of two who was struggling to combine caring for her children with her high-powered job in the city. The novel began with a comic scene in which Kate was responding to a school note, brought home by her five-year-old daughter that day, asking parents to contribute some food for next day’s school carol concert:

Even back in 1974, the dirty word had started to spread about mothers who went out to work. Females who wore trouser suits and even, it was alleged, allowed their children to watch television while it was still light. Rumours of neglect clung to these creatures like dust to their pelmets. So, you see, before I was really old enough to understand, the world of women was divided into two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the twin-tub, and there were the other sort. At the age



of thirty-five, I know precisely what kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of 13<sup>th</sup> December, hitting mince pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother made. (Pearson, 2003: 4-5)

This extract poignantly reveals long standing dilemmas faced by mothers. In the 1970s, feminist ideas were gaining momentum and it was being argued that mothers wanted more independence, autonomy and fulfilment through paid work (see, for example, Rich, 1970; Firestone, 1970; Greer, 1971). But by the beginning of the twenty first century, questions and anxieties about combining employment with motherhood had still not been resolved and it became increasingly expected that mothers with young children would be in paid work – an idea taken up by and promoted by New Labour. Yet this sat alongside the expectation that mothers would also be fully involved and engaged in the care activities associated with bringing up children. Indeed, this was an idea that arguably became *more* marked during the New Labour years owing to a range of factors. These included changing perceptions of children and of childhood (see Hendrick, 2003; Hardyment, 2007; Kehily, 2010); a backlash against consumerist and individualistic values associated with the rise of mothers in paid work which were seen as interfering with the way in which children were being brought up (see Layard and Dunn, 2009); and the emergence of an ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996).

The increased emphasis on the importance of a mother's nurturing presence – an ideology of intensive mothering – was documented by Sharon Hays (1996) in her analysis of the US context. She argued that an ideology of intensive mothering assumed that:

Children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centred on children's needs, with methods that are informed by experts, labour intensive and costly...because it is what children *need* and *deserve*. (Hays, 1996: 21, emphasis added)

Drawing on her observations, Douglas and Michaels (2004) spoke of a 'new momism' that articulated the idea that 'no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids', that women remain the 'best primary caretakers of children', and that to be 'a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 4). Although these observations were based on discourses and experiences in the US context, similar sentiments took root in the UK too. This could be seen, for example, through the explosion of newspaper and magazine articles orientated around what became known as the 'Mummy Wars' in which career women were pitted against stay at home mothers (see, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 2006; *Daily Mail*, 2009; *Observer*, 2010); and the rise of a 'Yummy Mummy' discourse with its suggestions that fashionable, younger, 'modern' women were increasingly choosing to stay at home (Fraser, 2007).

Ideas of intensive mothering sat in tension with ideas of maternal employment and often produced feelings of guilt and anxiety amongst mothers in paid work – feelings that were powerfully portrayed in Pearson's novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*:

It's the first time I've seen my son in four days. Four days, three nights. First there was the trip to Stockholm to spend some time with a jumpy new client, then Rod Task called from the office and told me to get my ass over to New York and hold the hand of an old client who needed reassuring that the new client wasn't taking up too much of my time. Benjamin never holds my absences against me. Too little still. He always greets me with helpless delight like a fan windmilling arms at a Hollywood Premiere. Not his sister, though. Emily is five years old and full of jealous wisdom. Mummy's return is always the cue for an intricate sequence of snubs and punishments. (Pearson, 2003: 9)

Pearson's novel worked because of the tensions between political and public discourses of the importance of parental participation in paid work, and expectations of intensive mothering. Her character, Kate, highlighted these tensions and the apparent implications of this for the quality of



her workplace performance and, much more significantly, for her children's well-being: 'Since Emily was born, I swear to God that every month there's been some new research proving that my child wrecks my work prospects or, more painfully, my work wrecks my child's prospects' (Pearson, 2003: 178).

There are many times in the novel when Kate compared her situation with mothers who were not in paid work, articulating and re-affirming discourses of the mummy wars. For example, she sometimes spoke enviously of stay at home mothers because of the time they had with their children; and sometimes with loathing because they did what she was unwilling to do – give up her paid job and spend more time with her children. In another best-selling novel, *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy* by Fiona Neill, written a few years later, the heroine of the novel, Lucy Sweeney, had found her own way of resolving the tensions and anxieties she felt about combining paid work with caring for children:

I gave up the job I loved as a television news producer eight years ago, when I discovered that thirteen hour days and motherhood were an unstable partnership. Whoever suggested that working full time and having children equated to having it all wasn't very good at maths. There was always something in deficit. Including our bank balance, because there wasn't much change from what we paid the nanny. And besides, I missed Sam too much. (Neill, 2008: 12)

Lucy's decision to give up her job – to relieve acute time pressures and to fulfil her desire to spend more time with her son – was further justified with reference to psychological theories about the importance of parental presence for child well-being and development:

'According to Mark [her brother, who is a psychologist], we are burdened by recent trends in psychotherapeutic thought, which reject the idea that children are born with a unique set of traits and instead place full responsibility for every aspect of development fairly and

squarely on our shoulders...Flash cards, Baby Einstein, pencil grip, it's all part of the belief that you can model your children like clay, when the truth is as long as you avoid extremes, the outcome for the child will be pretty much the same. I want to believe him but...' (Neill, 2008: 19-20)

Lucy acknowledged scepticism of the idea that the ways in which children develop is entirely related to how they are mothered, alongside – as seen through her use of the word 'but' – her nagging doubt that it may be true, and given this it was something she did not want to risk.

The range of anxieties portrayed in these two novels was explored in research and analysis from feminist scholars during the New Labour years. Their work highlighted various cultural tensions and a persisting lack of adequate structural supports, including sufficiently funded leaves and flexible work opportunities, and affordable, high quality childcare, which all continued to make it difficult for mothers to combine paid work with caring for their children (see Duncan, Edwards et al, 2003; Lister, 2003; Williams, 2004; Pfau-Effinger, 2006; Gambles et al, 2006; Crompton, Lewis and Lyonette, 2007; Kremer, 2007; Lewis, J., 2010). These feminist scholars also suggested that there was a lack of attention to gendered dynamics in relation to the division of paid and unpaid work and care which perpetuated many of the anxieties and tensions that mothers – but also fathers – were experiencing.

Since the late 1980s, the amount of research, policy activity about and public interest in fatherhood had risen dramatically (see, for example, Lewis, 1986; Burgess, 1997; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; O'Brien, 2005; Dermott, 2008). There were a number of reasons for this including growing awareness that fathers' involvement in caring for children was essential if gender equality was ever to be realised (Hochschild, 1989; Lewis, 2002; Stanley, 2005), but also because of research that demonstrated how increased father involvement with their children yielded positive outcomes in terms of child well-being and development (Scourfield and Drakeford, 2002; Flouri, 2005; Stanley, 2005). In this context, more and more fathers were expected to fulfil a dual role of 'being there' as



well as providing financially and they often expressed a desire to do this (O'Brien, 2005; Dermott, 2008). These ideas were both taken up by and further promoted by New Labour.

Yet for all the pressures and desires felt by fathers to be more involved in the care of their children, mothers tended to remain primarily responsible. Dermott (2008) found that fathers explained this with reference to varying combinations of three factors: *biology* and the belief that there was a unique connection between mother and child; *personal preferences* and the idea that this is what individual mothers and fathers wanted; and *social factors* including what was perceived as appropriate behaviour in the family setting, the workplace and throughout wider society more generally. While fathers were increasingly getting involved in feeding, bathing and putting their children to bed, many felt 'unsure about the role they should assume' (Stanley and Gamble, 2005: 10) and few were willing or able to make significant changes to their working patterns (Gershuny, 2000; O'Brien, 2005).

Expectations of maternal participation in paid work alongside the rise of intensive mothering ideals contributed to a sense of flux and uncertainty about appropriate mothering roles. And increasing father involvement in the care of children alongside fathers remaining more marginal than mothers in terms of caring for their children produced a parallel and related sense of flux and uncertainty about appropriate fathering roles too. These gendered ambiguities, explored further in chapter four, saw New Labour preferring to steer clear of making any stipulations about how mothers and fathers should manage the challenges of participating in paid work alongside caring for their children. Instead, New Labour emphasised parental *choice* in relation to mothers' and fathers' decisions and strategies saying 'the Government's vision is to ensure that every child gets the best start in life and to give parents more choice about how to balance work and family life' (HM Treasury, DfES et al, 2004: 1). As Lewis and Campbell (2007: 9) argued, 'every major government document on work-family balance has insisted that parents must make their own choices about how to balance work and family' – perhaps, because as Clarke et al (2006) suggested, choice as a political

and policy discourse apparently made room for personal preferences and was very difficult to disagree with.

Through the development of child care provisions, a range of parental leaves and flexible working practices, it was argued that New Labour's policy approach carried a sense that 'people can increasingly negotiate and shape their own working lives' in ways of their choosing (Mooney, 2004: 153). New Labour's emphasis on choice in relation to how parents' balanced paid work and family life therefore enabled New Labour to explain gendered experiences of parenting as a consequence of personal preferences (a view taken from and promoted by influential academics such as Hakim, 2000). Yet mothers and fathers experienced dilemmas about how to combine paid work with caring for children in different ways in which the particular responsibilities and difficulties that mothers face were 'obscured' (Williams, 2005: 299; see also Lewis and Campbell, 2007: 9-10); and the particular difficulties and anxieties fathers faced were often overlooked (Dermott, 2008). As Williams (2005: 299) concluded in her overview of New Labour's family policy, attention to gender dynamics and inequalities in New Labour's policies remained 'curiously sparse'.

### **Child development and the emphasis on parenting skills**

Throughout the entire thirteen year span of New Labour's time in office, children were placed at the centre of its vision and focus of family policy. In its early *Supporting Families* document, New Labour claimed that 'the interests of children must be paramount. The Government's interest in family policy is primarily an interest in ensuring that the next generation gets the best possible start in life' (Home Office, 1998: 4) and towards the end of its time in Government, this focus had remained and broadened. In *The Children's Plan*, New Labour announced that 'our aim is to make this the best place in the world for our children and young people to grow up' (DCSF, 2007: 3).



New Labour's pledge to eradicate child poverty was part of its emphasis on children. But its interest in enhancing child well-being and development went beyond economic and financial matters. It believed that many children also suffered from a parenting deficit in which their parents were not giving them sufficient support, guidance and encouragement (a view influenced by the work of Etzioni, 1993). As Fiona Williams (2005: 296-7) argued, behind much of the responsibility discourse lay a 'deficit model of family life and parenting capacity' which assumed families were being 'undermined by the decline in mutuality and growth of individualism'. Thus a focus on parental responsibility was New Labour's way of responding not only to economic but also moral concerns about the 'decline' of family stability as well as the perceived decline in neighbourhood and community cohesion (Gillies, 2005; see also Clarke and Newman, 2004; Hendrick, 2003). In *Supporting Families*, it was claimed that:

Good parenting benefits us all. It provides children with the best possible start in life. It improves their health, schooling and prospects in later life, and it reduces the risk of serious social problems such as truancy, offending, and drug misuse...Our priority is to provide better support for parents so that parents can provide better support for their children.

(Home Office, 1998: 6)

The view of parental responsibilities linked with an emphasis on parents being committed to a 'hard-working families' agenda as discussed earlier, but it went further than that and focused too on parental responsibilities for demonstrating or developing skills to effectively nurture and develop their child.

The notion of parental responsibility was somewhat capacious, but in terms of specific policies, Fiona Williams (2005) drew attention to New Labour's emphasis on parental obligations in relation to their children's behaviour. This included penalties such as fines or even imprisonment for having a truanting child, as well as responsibilities to be economically self-sufficient through paid work so as to set a good example to their children. But a whole set of policies focused, too, on

providing parents with more information and support in relation to their parenting. *Supporting Families* discussed the ways in which the development of parenting skills could be encouraged and, as part of this, New Labour proposed an enhanced role for midwives and health visitors, as well as the creation of Sure Start (an initiative I set out and discuss below).

*Supporting Families* claimed that midwives and health visitors focused on 'the critical stages of a child's early development, when help and support is most needed' (Home Office, 1998: 12). This demonstrated New Labour's focus on the first few years of a child's life – a period that had been signalled out as a time of particular significance for child development (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000; Zigler et al, 2002):

The early years of a child's life are critical to their future success and happiness. We are determined to invest in better opportunities for our youngest children and to support parents in preparing them to succeed at school and in life. (Home Office, 1998: 13)

In terms of midwives and health visitors, *Supporting Families* suggested a number of ways in which their role would be enhanced. These included: antenatal classes to teach parents about 'pregnancy, the labour, and how to bathe, feed, clothe and bond with their baby'; weekly home visits from a health visitor for the first six weeks of a child's life to 'enable the midwife or health visitor to spot any problems with the early parent/baby relationship or the child's growth or health'; infant clinics for health checks, to assist 'parents in coping with their children's development and involving fathers wherever possible to support the early development of parenting skills'. Added to this, health visitors would also be available to offer advice on feeding and weaning and concerns parents had about sleep so as to 'introduce a regular sleep pattern and avoid disrupted nights' (Home Office, 1998: 12).

The importance of midwives and health visitors was again emphasised in the 2007 *Every Parent Matters* document with reference to the ways in which their presence had been found to be



a cost-effective measure that led to positive, long term outcomes for children particularly amongst families experiencing high levels of deprivation (see DfES, 2007: 8). An enhanced role for midwives and health visitors, who were required to visit parents in their own home, was also justified because it might encourage particular parenting activities including increasing the likelihood of parents giving up smoking, improving the mother's diet in pregnancy, increasing breastfeeding initiation and duration and helping parents to re-engage with paid work or education (see DfES, 2007: 9).

Such an emphasis suggests that midwives and health visitors were seen as professionals who would work, particularly, with disadvantaged parents to skill and educate them to encourage particular parenting styles, activities and behaviours. This policy focus has been critically explored by Val Gillies who argued that:

While representations of poor parenting as a threat to society are long-standing, policy approaches in the UK have taken a new turn of late...an emphasis on social justice is used to warrant intervention in the traditionally private sphere of the family on the basis that children who are parented well will have a better chance of upward social mobility. According to the British government, a range of factors are key in enabling children to break the 'cycle of deprivation' and overcome the effects of disadvantage. These include strong relationships with parents, parental involvement with education, strong role models, feeling valued and individual characteristics such as intelligence. Conspicuously absent from this list is any acknowledgement of material or financial capital as significant resources for evening-out life chances...the implication is that a quality upbringing is all that is needed to ensure equal opportunity. (Gillies, 2007: 7)

This analysis underlines the classed address in New Labour's parenting policies in which some groups of parents were seen as more likely to need encouragement and support for developing parenting skills than others. This is where Sure Start, which had an explicit and particular focus on the well-being and development of children from socially or economically deprived backgrounds, came into



play. It sought to offer disadvantaged parents – parents who were ‘facing linked problems such as poor educational achievement, health or housing, or unemployment’ (Home Office, 1998: 13) – a one stop shop in which a range of parenting supports could be accessed easily and available in areas of greatest need.

The idea behind the development of Sure Start initiatives was therefore to target services for disadvantaged parents needing particular types of support. Reasons that were given for the development of Sure Start focused on the enhanced long term benefits such a scheme would have for children and society more generally:

By investing in Sure Start now, we will be able to continue reaping the benefits of improved social adjustment and reduced anti-social behaviour in twenty years time, through better success in employment, better health and reduced crime. (Home Office, 1998: 15)

Such a focus linked with the idea of a social investment state in which resources were to be targeted on children, particularly those deemed in most need, because of the sorts of citizens it was hoped they might become (Giddens, 1998; Lister, 2006). The importance of ‘good parenting’ and of encouraging and enabling the development of appropriate parental skills and behaviours in the realisation of this was very much emphasised. The ways in which Sure Start was intended to work was set out in the following statement:

Help will begin with a visit to every local family from an outreach worker within three months of the baby’s birth, in addition to other support currently provided, including visits from midwives and health visitors. These new visits will allow an introduction to what Sure Start can offer, including an assessment of the needs of the child and advice for the parents. Support in the home may continue and be extended if it is needed by the family – for example if the parents lack confidence to visit more formal services. Sure Start will also offer additional primary healthcare, both for young children and their mothers. This may include

advice on breastfeeding and caring for young children, and support for new mothers including those suffering from post-natal depression. Sure Start will support parents as much as children. This may include: training for work; help with literacy or numeracy; help and advice on discipline or other parenting problems...; [and] more specific support for the families of children with learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural problems. (Home Office, 1998: 14)

This extract demonstrates how government placed many sets of ideals and expectations on parents including ones about breastfeeding, about appropriate ways to care for and discipline young children, and expectations that parents would train for and be ready for involvement in paid work. Given this, Val Gillies (2005: 71) came to conclude that New Labour's support for parents was 'driven by a particular moral agenda' that sought to 'regulate and control the behaviour of marginalised families' (Gillies, 2005: 71).

However, an agenda to regulate and control the behaviour of *all* parents was something that could be seen in wider public discourses about parenting. Parenting manuals, in existence in various forms for at least the past couple of centuries (Hardyment, 2007), have long sought to offer advice and support to parents about parenting with topics ranging from feeding to sleeping to discipline. But during the New Labour years the number of such manuals grew exponentially and an explosion in popular television shows and websites that offered advice and support to parents also occurred. In a review of New Labour's family policy, Claire James commented that:

There has arguably been a cultural shift over the past 10 years that has brought advice on parenting *more into the mainstream*. Television parenting programmes such as *Supernanny* are a relatively new phenomenon. In 2006 a survey found that almost three quarters of parents had watched at least one parenting programme, and of these more than eight in 10 found something in the programmes helpful to them. (James, 2009: 7, emphasis added)



This demonstrates the popularity of *Supernanny* and other reality parenting TV shows such as *Little Angels*, *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, and *Nanny 911*. These programmes focused on the education and training of parents to enable them to deal more effectively with their children. The philosophy behind the TV show *Supernanny* was summed up by Jo Frost (the Supernanny) in her book as follows:

I don't think there's such a thing as a 'bad' child. I believe that every child has the potential to behave as expected. By that I don't mean Goody Two Shoes. I mean happy, relaxed children who have their own individual characters but who know where the limits are. Everything I've seen and experienced convinces me that children need boundaries. And to keep those boundaries in place, there needs to be discipline. Discipline is not about harsh punishment. A key part of it, in fact, is praise. But it does mean setting rules and backing up the rules with firm and fair control. (Frost, 2005: 11-12)

While Frost claimed there was no such thing as 'a bad child', her comments in her book and her TV programmes suggested she thought there was such a thing as 'bad parenting'. The show, and her book, focused on changing this by encouraging parents to reflect on the problems they were facing in relation to their children's behaviour, to take responsibility for adopting her 'tried-and-tested' rules and techniques for improving this, and to take responsibility for putting in the hard work necessary to achieve the promised results of well-behaved children.

The desire for good parenting – and the importance of intervening whilst children were young – tapped into a range of concerns about 'bad' parenting that was linked with widespread concerns about 'unruly' children and teenagers and their anti-social behaviour. As the then Prime Minister Tony Blair said:

If we are not prepared to predict and intervene far more early then there are children that are going to grow up in families that we know perfectly well are completely dysfunctional



and the kids a few years down the line are going to be a menace to society and actually a threat to themselves. (Blair, 2006, cited in James, 2009: 10)

A policy emphasis on the skilling of parents, particularly during the early years, was subsequently justified by New Labour through its acknowledgment that parents themselves were showing interest in popular cultural texts offering advice and encouragement to parents about their parenting. In the foreword to *Every Parent Matters*, it was noted that 'parents are demonstrating a growing appetite for discussion, information and advice, as we see from the increasingly vibrant market in television programmes, magazines and websites' (DfES, 2007: 1). As stated in the *Every Parent Matters* document, 'parents and the home environment they create are the single most important factor in shaping their children's well-being, achievements and prospects' (DfES, 2007: 3). In this way parenting, and the issue of ensuring parents were adequately skilled, had become an issue of both increasing public and political concern.

### **Brain research and implications for parenting**

The focus on parenting skills was further bolstered, though in somewhat different ways, by research exploring the impact of cortisol levels on brain development and the ways in which parenting styles and attributes affected this. Cortisol is a stress hormone described as a 'key player in our emotional lives' (Gerhardt, 2004: 57) and research was suggesting that the amount of love and attention parents were able to give to their children affected their cortisol levels which, in turn, affected the extent to which their children would be able to relate to others as they grew up (Gerhardt, 2004; Zigler et al, 2002). It also affected the likelihood of that child experiencing anxiety, depression, personality disorders and illnesses such as cancer later in life (*ibid*). In a best-selling book summarising this research, which in itself demonstrates the interest and awareness in this, Gerhardt explained that:

Human babies...tend to have low levels of cortisol for the first few months, as long as caring adults maintain their equilibrium through touch, stroking, feeding and rocking. But their immature systems are also very unstable and reactive; they can be plunged into very high cortisol levels if there is no one responding to them. Babies cannot manage their own cortisol. (Gerhardt, 2004: 65)

Brain research therefore became another pressure on parenting indicating the importance of a continual and responsive presence.

Given the significance of the findings from brain research for child well-being and future development, Gerhardt argued that policy needed to focus more on the early years:

Well-intentioned governments have recognised the need to support family life. They have put measures in place to do so – from tax credits to parenting classes. Politicians and policy makers are only too aware of the cost to society of dysfunctional families, with their links to crime, violence and drug abuse. Although such supports are vital to those who receive them, they are like occasional food parcels for the starving, or to use another analogy, it is more like pouring money into the maintenance of a badly built house...For prevention to be effective, it needs to be targeted at the point when it can make the most difference. These foundations are laid during pregnancy and in the first two years of life. This is when the 'social brain' is shaped and when an individual's emotional style and emotional resources are established. (Gerhardt, 2004: 2-3)

Gerhardt suggested that most parents, and, in particular, most mothers, effectively laid these foundations instinctively but that in some cases this did not happen. In these cases, she felt that what was needed was parent-infant psychotherapy for mothers experiencing difficulties with their parenting and for government to support this. Parenting difficulties were, she argued, something that was much more frequent amongst mothers living in poverty because they were much more



likely than affluent mothers to be suffering from depression. She argued that, for these mothers, therapy was needed because the difficulties that such women experienced were 'not due solely to poverty or current problems alone' but had to 'be understood in the context of a life history of poor regulation, rooted in their own childhood experiences' (Gerhardt, 2004: 125). What mattered most, then, was 'whether or not they had a good relationship with their mother in childhood' (*ibid*), and that in order to stop 'damaging emotional patterns from repeating themselves' parent-infant psychotherapy and greater support from health visitors was necessary (2004: 218). Therapeutic strategies were therefore being advocated as a way to tackle what Gerhardt referred to as 'poor parenting' (2004: 39), even though such a strategy has been critiqued for its lack of attention to wider and more culturally embedded gendered and classed dynamics framing the construction of the 'problem' and associated solutions (Gillies, 2007; see, also, the arguments of Bacchi, 1999).

The findings of brain research were taken up, in part, by New Labour (see Hughes and Cooke, 2007) to further justify and develop its focus on developing parenting skills:

We have clear evidence as children move through their early years, of the positive impact of parental engagement on children's cognitive and social development; as well as on numeracy and literacy skills. It is a time of rapid brain growth and research has shown a direct link between the stimulation a child receives and their brain development. (DfES, 2007: 8)

New research into brain development, attachment and the impact of stress in pregnancy confirms our view that pregnancy and the first years of life are the most important formative stage. (DCSF, 2007: 31)

The use of the word 'attachment' in the above statement was particularly significant and echoed ideas developed by child psychoanalysts such as John Bowlby in the early 1950s. Bowlby (1953) and others such as Donald Winnicott emphasised the importance of the nurturing presence of the



mother for child well-being and development (see Muncie and Wetherell, 1995; Knijn, 2000 for summaries). Such claims have subsequently been subject to much criticism: historians and sociologists have argued that an emphasis on the particular importance of mother-child relations is a historic and culturally specific phenomenon; feminists have argued that these claims work to promote, justify and reinforce gendered inequalities; and psychologists have questioned the evidence used and claims made by these influential psychoanalysts (Rose, 1999: 180). The use of the word attachment in the *Children's Plan* demonstrated, however, how such ideas were being reaffirmed.

The policy texts mentioned above used the term parenting in the context of enhancing child development but this had distinctly gendered implications given that it was mostly the case that mothers were the primary carers. Parents, particularly mothers, were hearing how important their presence was for their child's well-being and future development – ideas fuelled by and fuelling an ideology of intensive mothering. Yet ideas of intensive mothering sat uneasily with expectations and ideals about the importance of parental and maternal participation in paid employment. These tensions were exacerbated through developments in brain research. In recognition of such tensions, Gerhardt (2004: 22) wrote that it was 'not popular these days to spell out just how great the responsibilities of parenthood are, since women have struggled desperately to establish themselves as men's equals in the workplace and do not want to feel guilty about keeping their careers or pay cheques going while someone else takes care of their babies'. Yet she then went on to discuss how much the human baby depended on the continuous presence of his mother:

Psychologically, the human baby is still very much part of the mother's body. He [sic] depends on her milk to feed him, to regulate his heart and blood pressure, and to provide immune protection. His muscular activity is regulated by her touch, as is his growth hormone level. This basic physiological regulation keeps the baby alive...The difficult thing about babies is that they need this care almost continuously for many months...Babies need a

caregiver who identifies with them so strongly that the baby's needs feel like hers; he is still physiologically and psychologically an extension of her. If she feels bad when the baby feels bad, she will then want to do something about it immediately, to relieve the baby's discomfort – and this is the essence of regulation. In theory, anyone can do it now, especially now we have bottled milk substitutes, but the baby's mother is primed to do these things for her baby by her own hormones, and is more likely to have the intense identification with the baby's feelings that is needed, provided she has the inner resources to do so. (Gerhardt, 2004: 22-23)

Such claims held the mother – particularly the breastfeeding mother – up as the 'natural' person to take on the role of continuous and intensive caregiver, provided she had the 'inner' resources for this which, in its absence, was where Gerhardt thought parent-infant psychotherapy should be made use of (see also James, 2010). These claims emphasised the importance of the mother's presence with her child rather than her participation in the labour market.

The findings from brain research were gaining attention, too, in popular books about parenting towards the end of the New Labour years (see for example James, 2010; Leach, 2010; Wiessinger, West and Pitman, 2010). For example, leaving a baby to cry – a practice some have argued is essential for babies to learn to self-soothe and sleep through the night (Ferber, 1986, Ford, 2002) – was found to potentially raise a child's cortisol levels. Penelope Leach, a well-known author on parenting, drew on these findings to argue that:

It's not an opinion but a fact that it's potentially damaging to leave your babies to cry. Now we know that, why risk it?...The reason babies raised on a strict routine regimens go to sleep, usually with less and less crying, is because they are quicker and quicker to give up. Their brain has adapted to a world where they are not responded to...that kind of early-induced anxiety may relate to anxiety right through adult life. (*Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2010; see also Leach, 2010)



The potential risk of elevated cortisol levels was also drawn upon in claims about the potentially harmful effects of putting a young child in day care on a full time basis (Leach, 2010; James, 2010).

As one recent parenting manual stipulated:

The research-based reality is that neither one of you [mother or baby] is built, physiologically or emotionally, for long and regular separations. Growing research from a number of different countries shows a baby who is separated from his mother for the hours that full-time outside work requires has elevated cortisol levels – a clear sign of stress. It isn't always easy to tell how a baby is doing; the baby who seems quiet and content in the child care centre may actually have higher levels of stress hormones than one who cries and protests. (Wiessinger, West and Pitman, 2010: 280-281)

Given this, the psychologist Oliver James advised mothers that it was best for a young child to be looked after by its mother at home or, if this would make her too depressed, to be cared for by a relative or child minder in a *one-to-one* setting while she participated in paid work (James, 2010; see also *Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2010).

The claims from brain research, whilst controversial (see, for example, Bruer, 1999; Tallis, 2011), produced big challenges for various parenting approaches and ideas about mothers of young children being in paid work. New Labour was not oblivious to this. In partial recognition of the tensions between the importance of parental time with children that brain research was revealing, and the importance New Labour placed on supporting parents in paid work, New Labour reiterated its leave and child care policies that it had made available to parents:

The evidence on child development has significant implications for policy...for the first year of a child's life the priority should be to create conditions that support consistent one to one care; for children aged one to three the priority for childcare must be high quality provision for those who choose to use it. (HM Treasury, DfES et al, 2004: 9)



The potential problems of raised cortisol levels through frequent use of child care, and the long term effects of this on children that were being suggested through brain research were, however, not acknowledged. New Labour *did* stipulate that it wanted 'all children to develop strong social and emotional skills from the early years on' and that it was 'working to promote attachment and bonding in the first years of life including through extending maternity and paternity leave' (DCSF, 2007: 33). But it retained its focus on supporting parents through labour market participation and the provision of high quality child care once the child was more than one year old.

This chapter has explored the political and public context of parenting during the New Labour years. The degree of attention given to parenting could be seen through the range of policy developments in parenting, the burgeoning popular cultural texts about parenting, as well as in academic literature and debates (see also the ESRC funded seminar series and research centre on parenting, [www.parentingculturestudies.org/](http://www.parentingculturestudies.org/)). I have discussed how attention to parents and their parenting developed through a number of social concerns including those of tackling child poverty, reducing anti-social behaviour, responding to changing gender relations and attempting to enhance child well-being and development. In doing so, this chapter has highlighted a number of political and public anxieties about parenting as well as tensions between them.

In an assessment of New Labour's family policy, Fiona Williams (2005: 300) suggested that in as far as a new normative vision was emerging, this revolved around an adult couple whose 'relationship is based on their parenting responsibilities, and whose priorities are rooted in work, economic self-sufficiency, education and good behaviour'. Yet this vision contained tensions between ideas about work as paid work and the work of parenting, and gendered tensions in terms of which types of work mothers and fathers would undertake. For example, this chapter has revealed the presence of an ideal of gender equality in which mothers were seen as willing and able to be active in paid work just as fathers were seen as increasingly willing and able to be active in the

daily nurturance of their children; yet it has also demonstrated the presence of a gendered ideal of parenting in which the maternal role was promoted as one prioritising the daily care and nurturance of their child, whilst the paternal role was promoted as one prioritising financial provision. The normative vision of New Labour that Fiona Williams set out also contained a number of classed tensions. The mothers whom New Labour really wanted in paid work were lone mothers so as to ensure they were economically self-sufficient. Yet the parents, particularly the mothers, that it also wanted to engage the most in developing and practising time intensive parenting skills were those in the most socially and economically deprived contexts – often, though not always, lone mothers. However, middle class mothers also faced a number of dilemmas. This was because it was not just Government that was promoting messages about parenting and of the importance of parents, particularly mothers, spending time with their children. These messages were also being promoted through many of the parenting advice manuals, as well as television programmes and website forums that focused on parenting.

My research suggests that dilemmas about the gendered dynamics of parenting, of parenting styles and approaches, and about work – which are all explored respectively in chapters four, five and six – were picked up and internalised by parents regardless of their gendered or classed positionings. Indeed, as the founders of *Mumsnet*, the influential parenting website, commented:

These days new parents and parents-to-be are blessed – or cursed – with an unimaginably wider range of choices. In the smallest of small town book shops, you'll find several dozen titles dispensing every brand of advice from 'tough love' to 'baby knows best' and every shade in between. So do you plump for a Spock-style 'go with the flow' approach, an authoritarian, medical sounding type or one of the vogueish new disciplinarians, who people seem to be discussing a lot over dinner parties? And what if you make the wrong choice? Might you be scarring your child for life by opting for a hawkish, routine-driven regime? Or

laying the foundations for a selfish and indulgent adult by choosing to demand feed? (Foster et al, 2003: x)

This quotation demonstrates the sense that how parents parented *really* mattered, because what was at stake was none other than the future well-being, development and mental health of their child and, as a consequence, future society more generally. This sense had been promoted through policy and popular culture and, as I reveal in the chapters to come, was felt and experienced by a range of different parents. This chapter has made clear some of the ways that parenting became an issue of increasing political and public concern during the New Labour years and a site of intense contradiction and anxiety. It has sought to contextualise my research questions that I address in the chapters to come. But first I turn to a discussion of how I carried out the research on which my explorations and analyses are based.



### 3. Searching for a structure of feeling: a discussion of my research approach

In this chapter I discuss the ways in which I utilised and extended Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach in addressing my research questions:

- What does a study of policy, popular culture and personal accounts suggest about a contemporary structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years?
- And how might the structure of feeling approach enrich understandings of the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives?

These questions demonstrate two different ways in which I made use of Williams' approach: to identify a structure of feeling about parenting; but also to explore how useful this approach might be for studying the impact of policy on parents' personal lives. In this chapter I discuss further Raymond Williams' conceptualisation of structure of feeling, with particular emphasis on the presence of interrelated movements and tendencies. I suggest some of the gaps in Williams' own intellectual considerations, as revealed through feminist critiques, alongside my interest in extending the structure of feeling approach to make it more appropriate for research exploring parenting, and its gendered dynamics, during the New Labour years. Williams set up structure of feeling not only as a concept and theory, but also a methodological approach and my selection of data sources were a key part of my development of the approach. Like Williams, I used cultural texts including policy documents and popular cultural representations, but I also used personal accounts from parents that were accessed through interviews and I outline my reasoning for this more fully in this chapter. I end by discussing another way in which I extended the structure of feeling approach through a consideration of different meanings of feeling. Like Williams, I used feeling as something referring to a public mood of a moment, but I also used it as something referring to *personal* feelings and sought to consider how these were shaped by and shaping of the public mood.

## **Interrelated movements and tendencies making up a structure of feeling**

In attempting to study culture, Williams suggested that:

The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions – traditions, institutions, and formations – but also in the dynamic interrelationships...it is necessary at every point to recognise the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance. (Williams, 1977: 121)

The idea of an interrelating set of movements and tendencies was therefore central to Raymond Williams' understanding and theorising of culture as well as the development of his structure of feeling concept and approach (1961; 1977) which I set out and explained in chapter one.

Williams initially characterised the interrelated movements and tendencies making up a structure of feeling as dominant and alternative social characters (Williams, 1961). In later work he developed this by speaking of alternative social characters as residual and emergent (Williams, 1977). He defined the dominant as being like Gramsci's idea of hegemony: 'a lived system of meanings and values' and a 'sense of reality for most people in the society...beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move...It is in the strongest sense a "culture", but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes' (Williams, 1977: 110). Williams argued that there was always a dominant set of tendencies characterising a particular period but that these co-existed with residual and emergent forces that were within and beyond the dominant of that period, and which made resistance and / or social change possible.

In defining the residual, Williams spoke of forces that were formed in the past but which were 'still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past but as an effective element of the present' (Williams, 1977: 122). For Williams, the residual therefore



referred to older ideas that were still influential: ideas which had not been fully incorporated by the dominant, which had resisted transformation and persisted in the present. Williams argued that the residual would often be incorporated into the dominant through 'reinterpretation, dilution, projection' or some kind of 'discriminating inclusion and exclusion' (Williams, 1977: 123). The actively residual could therefore shift, in various ways, the very nature of the dominant as well as remaining visible as residual within the structure of feeling of the era.

In terms of the emergent, Williams defined it as 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created' (1977: 123). Emergent movements and tendencies sought and called for recognition and acknowledgment by the dominant, and therefore held the potential for shifting and altering the dominant itself. Williams argued that the residual was easier to understand than the emergent because the residual referred to earlier social ideas and cultural processes which had already been articulated: 'a large part of it (though not all) relates to earlier social formations and phases of the cultural process, in which certain real meanings and values were generated' (1977: 123). The emergent, however, was more difficult because what could be located was more of 'a pre-emergence, active and pressing but not yet fully articulated' (Williams, 1977: 126). Moreover, it was not wholly clear whether what appeared to be the emergent was actually an extension of existing dominant ideas and forces or something that was emergent in that it went beyond or against the dominant in ways that shifted or realigned it:

It is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant (and in this sense 'species-specific') and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it. (Williams, 1977: 123)

Nevertheless, he argued that the search for residual and emergent forces was vital for two reasons: for enabling a more complete understanding of the culture and ethos of a period; but also for guarding against the incorporation and seizure of residual or emergent forces by the dominant



through processes which could look 'like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of acceptance' (Williams, 1977: 125). In this respect, he was suggesting that the location of residual and emergent forces was a significant activity in its own right, but also in terms of what this revealed about the dominant of the period in question (Williams, 1977: 122). Indeed, Williams argued that the dominant, residual and emergent could only be located and understood *in interaction with each other*; and that locating what might make up residual and emergent forces, in interaction with the dominant, could also point to the political-cultural work that the dominant is continually seeking to do. As Clarke and colleagues have suggested:

The political-cultural work of the dominant tendency involves trying to maintain its own internal coherence; trying to displace the residual elements (undermining their persistence or apparent relevance to the present); and trying to co-opt elements of the emergent and residual (transforming them in ways that apparently support the dominant). (Clarke et al, 2007: 152)

The interplay and interrelationships between dominant, residual and emergent tendencies were, argued Williams, what came together to make up alignments and contradictions that constituted a structure of feeling of a particular period. And the fact that a structure of feeling contained so many contradictions meant it could never be static or fixed. Rather it was something that was being continually made and remade through particular interactions of dominant, residual and emergent tendencies.

Raymond Williams' interest in locating the interrelationships between dominant, residual and emergent tendencies that made up a structure of feeling, and in cultural analysis more generally, was connected to his interests in class struggle: understanding the various cultural dynamics that held back social change but that also offered the potential for gradual transformation. My own interest in researching experiences of becoming a parent during the New Labour years was primarily motivated by my interest in gender dynamics that held back but also offered potential for

social change. In doing this, I sought to utilise the idea of a structure of feeling to understand, in particular, gendered dynamics at play during the New Labour years in the context of parenting.

It has been noted that Williams' himself did not pay attention to dimensions of social difference such as gender. As Milner (2006: 3) has said, Williams was 'never able adequately to theorise or even articulate emotionally questions of sexual politics which motivate feminism'. In summarising some of the key feminist critiques, Milner wrote:

The year after his death, Jane Miller asked exasperatedly how a thinker so willing to 'rethink absolutely' even the most central tenets of Marxism could be so unwilling to 'countenance even the questions which feminists have addressed' (Miller, 1990: 48). Morag Shiach, one of Williams's students, described the double response to his work from within feminism thus: 'some respond to what they feel ought to be its implications, others ... with frustration and anger to what it does not say' (Shiach, 1995: 57). (Milner, 2006: 3)

In discussing Williams' failure to take up insights from feminist theory and research, and his failure to include women's distinct gendered experiences, Miller (1990) pointed to the presence of a male romance in Williams' work which she argued was typical of most men of his generation and which was bound up with his own living hegemony: his own gendered meanings, values and sense of reality which was very difficult for him to move beyond. Williams was the son of a railway worker who lived in a Welsh village where all the men voted Labour and Miller described the male romance that was present in his hegemony as one which was:

...always with the harshness of landscape and the harshness of labour in relation to that landscape. It was a romance with and about men, which was at the same time profoundly homosexual and profoundly homophobic, always bound up with physical labour, with men's bodies and the solidarity amongst those of them who worked together. (Miller, 1990: 63 – 64)



Women, Miller argued, were more of a 'peripheral presence' in this hegemony because of their disruptive potential for this romance (*ibid*). Yet Williams' failure to consider women's distinct gendered experiences was something she considered to be particularly problematic given how women were so often *the transmitters of culture*, particularly as mothers:

Even mothers – who are likely at least to be young children's first and most significant interlocutors, and therefore irrevocably implicated in their earliest dialogic or conversational forays into the world – are outside the romance, perhaps they most of all. Yet it is surely within those first conversations, those shared sightings and namings, that specificity, the material detail and concrete knowing of the world are learned as values within an actual, evolving culture. The development from this first learning to children's (and especially boys') movement away from mothers, away from home, will vary according to class, place, time. Gender is always learned, however, and by children of both sexes, through these earliest articulations and manifestations of difference and similarity. It seems probable, indeed, that such differences are perceived and interpreted even before differences of class and race in most children's lives. (Miller, 1990: 64)

Miller's arguments for the importance of including women, not least because of the culture they transmit as mothers, were made in 1990 when feminist ideas had become more firmly embedded in the academic and cultural context. Her work, critiquing the work of Williams', therefore has to be seen in a particular context where it had become increasingly popular to focus on the gendered dynamics of theory and experience. This demonstrates how researchers, the research context and research interests of particular moments are affected by the wider structure of feeling of the period – something which could partly excuse Williams. And in a discussion of Williams' lack of interest in struggles beyond class, and what this meant for evolving feminist research, Shiach concluded that 'feminists can find much of use to them in the work of Raymond Williams' and that his ideas 'may help in the difficult political and theoretical task of developing a feminist analysis of the role of



gender in the construction and maintenance of the contemporary social formation' (Shiach, 1995: 51, 57, cited in Milner, 2006: 3).

I found myself in agreement with this conclusion largely because I have found Williams' work, particularly his idea of a structure of feeling, to be so useful for theorising the ways in which different and sometimes contradictory forces come together to shape understandings and experiences of a particular period. Moreover, as discussed in chapter two, because of the contradictory ways in which parenting had emerged as a political and public issue during the New Labour years, the idea of a structure of feeling infused with feminist insights seemed particularly appropriate for considering personal and political entanglements of becoming a parent.

### **The search for a structure of feeling about parenting: selecting and analysing the sources**

For Williams, structure of feeling was not just a theoretical concept but also a methodological approach (Williams, 1961: 70). This was because, for him, his theories emerged from immersion and investigation of the evidence itself. Of the different movements and tendencies making up a structure of feeling he wrote: 'the recognition is very difficult, theoretically, though the practical evidence is abundant' (Williams, 1977: 125). He went on to argue that:

Methodologically... 'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence. It is initially less simple than formally structured hypotheses of the social, but it is more adequate to the actual range of cultural evidence: historically certainly, but even more (where it matters most) in our present cultural process. (Williams, 1977: 132-133)

It would appear then, that one of the most critical aspects of structure of feeling as an approach is the sources selected for analysis. Moreover, in the analysis of these sources, it is attention to

patterns that emerge from readings of these that enable the location of interrelated forces that come together to create the structure of feeling of the period under investigation. As Williams argued:

The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organisation which is the complex of these relationships. Analysis of particular works or institutions is, in this context, analysis of their essential kind of organisation, the relationships which works or institutions embody as parts of the organisation as a whole. A key-word, in such analysis, is pattern: it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationships between these patterns...that general cultural analysis is concerned. (Williams, 1961: 63)

It is therefore to a discussion of the sources and their analysis that I now turn.

Williams illustrated his claim that structure of feeling was both a theoretical and methodological approach with reference to an analysis of England in the 1840s. In this example, he argued that legislation or policy of a period, indicating the official consciousness, could offer some indication of a mood characterising the time but only if it was read alongside a variety of other cultural texts of that period (Williams, 1961: 70 - 88). He argued, for example, that legislative texts such as the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) suggested a mood which emphasised the value and importance of hard work, sobriety and individual effort. This thinking included a dominant idea that the poor were poor because they were lazy and / or morally deviant. Yet Williams argued that an analysis of other cultural texts of the same period made visible alternative beliefs and ways of being:

Early Victorian ideology, for example, specified the exposure caused by poverty or by debt or by illegitimacy as social failure or deviation; the contemporary structure of feeling, meanwhile, in the new semantic figures of Dickens, of Emily Bronte, and others, specified



exposure and isolation as a general condition, and poverty, debt or illegitimacy as its connecting instances. (Williams, 1977: 134)

Williams therefore argued that studying a wide range of cultural texts demonstrated the ways in which 'alternative social characters were in fact alive, and that these affected, in important ways, the whole life of the time' (Williams, 1961: 78).

Given my interest in locating a structure of feeling about parenting, I sought out sources that would capture the interaction of dominant, residual and emergent tendencies about experiences of becoming a parent. With this in mind, I selected three types of source material. The first was a selection of New Labour policy texts that spanned the period in which it was in government. This enabled me to identify continuing and shifting trends in rhetoric and policy. The second was a selection of popular cultural representations of parenting of that same period. Having different sources, which included, parenting manuals, a parenting TV show and a parenting website, enabled me to explore different genres of popular culture and their different styles and types of address. The third source was interviews with mothers and fathers who had become parents towards the end of the New Labour years. Interviews were selected as a source because of my desire to explore and probe personal feelings and accounts and to consider the ways in which these accounts interacted with policy and popular cultural discourses. In this section I discuss the policy documents and popular cultural texts I made use of. I also discuss my rationale for including interviews, how I went about finding interview subjects and how I conducted and analysed the various sources.

### *Policy documents*

Alongside consideration of general analyses and critiques of New Labour's policy approach towards parenting, my analysis focused on five particular policy documents which enabled me to locate

prominent themes within New Labour discourses about parenting. The very presence of policy documents focusing on parenting marked, in itself, a changing mood and feeling about the acceptability of the scope, reach and relevance of the state in family life. Indeed, in the influential Green Paper, *Supporting Families*, published by the Home Office in 1998, the then Home Secretary Jack Straw wrote in the foreword that this was ‘the first time *any Government [in the UK]* has published a consultation document on the family’ (Home Office 1998: 2, *my emphasis*).<sup>2</sup> This was, as suggested in the last chapter, because previous Governments had thought the family was too sacred or private an arena for certain kinds of government attention and intervention. In selecting particular documents to analyse I was guided by two key themes about parenting that were first discussed in *Supporting Families*. These themes were the ideas of hard-working families and parents as skilled educators of their children. While these themes were a constant presence during the New Labour years they were emphasised to different degrees at different points. The documents I selected for analysis therefore sought to capture these themes and their development. They were:

- Home Office (1998) *Supporting Families*;
- HM Treasury and Department for Trade and Industry (2003) *Balancing work and family life: Enhancing choice and support for parents*;
- HM Treasury, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Work and Pensions, and Department for Trade and Industry (2004) *Choice for Parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*;
- Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Every Parent Matters*;
- Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *The Children’s Plan*.

These documents, published at various points between 1998 and 2007, constituted a sample spanning the period in which New Labour was in Government. Parenting was discussed in a range of

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<sup>2</sup> That this document was published by the Home Office could be seen to suggest New Labour’s initial interest in supporting families as one of seeking to prevent, for example, anti-social behaviour. Yet its publication by the Home Office could also have been because of the other role played by Jack Straw MP, held at the time of its publication, which was Chair of the Ministerial Group on Families.



other documents on, for example, social exclusion, anti-social behaviour, education and health. But the documents I selected explicitly articulated government thinking on parents and their parenting. In analysing these documents, I was interested in the discourses produced by government about parenting, particularly the first few years of parenting, and how these discourses and ideological dilemmas they revealed pointed to a structure of feeling about parenting.

As I have noted, *Supporting Families* offered the first explicit statement from the New Labour Government about its position on and policy approach towards parents and families. Though there was, at the time, much academic debate about what or who constituted or counted as a family (Silva and Smart, 1999; see also Gubrium and Holstein, 1990), the document focused on children and their parenting. As Maclean (2002: 65) explained, the document indicated 'that "children come first", that they need stability, that governments help and support but do not replace parents, and that all families are included. Parenting lies at the heart of the policy'. My analysis began with this paper and continued to follow the two key themes identified in my reading of it.

The first theme, as discussed in chapter two, was one in which New Labour emphasised supporting parents to be in paid work and to balance this with caring for their children. Particular policy examples that were part of this theme included working tax credits, the development of maternity and new parental leaves, and greater encouragement of family-friendly employment practices. From 2000, with the launch of its Work-Life Balance Campaign, work-life balance discourses went on to feature extensively and, as my research focused on parents, the second selected document was *Balancing work and family life: Enhancing choice and support for parents*, published in 2003 by HM Treasury and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). With its specific focus on parents, this document set out why the government perceived balancing work and family life to be a significant issue and discussed ways in which parents would be supported by government in dealing with this. The third selected policy document was *Choice for Parents, the best start for*

*children: a ten year strategy for childcare*, published in 2004 by HM Treasury, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the DTI. This document extended many of the themes discussed in *Balancing work and family life* and set out ways in which New Labour had already responded to evidence about parents and children's needs as well as setting out a ten year strategy for future developments. It also focused on the idea of choice – a more general New Labour discourse utilised in its public service reforms – which became a particularly significant discourse in the area of support for child care and work-life balance issues.

The second theme centred on parenting skills and the emphasis on supporting parents to develop these – an issue that was also outlined in chapter two. Therefore the fourth selected policy document, relating specifically to parents and parenting skills and practices, was *Every Parent Matters*, published in 2007, by the Department for Education and Skills. This was the follow up to the *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) policy document and agenda that focused, in the main, on the role of local government social services and social workers. *Every Parent Matters* therefore went on to offer the Government's most clearly articulated position on the role of parents and parenting in promoting and being responsible for their child's well-being and development. Finally, I selected *The Children's Plan*, which was published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, previously DfES) in 2007. This document was the first and most significant policy discussion paper about children (and, by implication, their parents and parenting) after Gordon Brown took over from Tony Blair as Prime Minister in June 2007.

These documents were used to examine the various ways in which New Labour articulated its interest in, and support for, parents and their parenting. While there were also a number of other relevant documents, speeches and legislation that in various explicit and implicit ways related to parents and their parenting, my analysis focused on these documents as pieces that indicated and elucidated patterns about New Labour's stance on the first few years of parenting. These documents were used to explore the ways in which policy – as official consciousness – sought to

respond to, position itself towards and shape a structure of feeling about parenting. In particular, these documents were used to identify ideological dilemmas that went on to inform my analysis of popular culture and personal accounts. I drew extensively on these documents in the previous chapter in which I discussed the political and public context relating to parenting during the New Labour years. In the chapters to come I continue to make use of these documents alongside analysis of popular cultural representations of parenting and the interviews I carried out.

### *Popular cultural representations*

My analysis of popular cultural representations focused on three particular types of texts: parenting manuals; the TV programme *Supernanny*; and the interactive parenting website *Mumsnet.com*.

Parenting manuals were selected owing to the popularity of this genre amongst many parents, particularly mothers. Most first time mothers are believed to consult at least one parenting and child care manual during pregnancy or in the early years of their child's life (Marshall, 1991; see also Sunderland, 2006) – a claim that certainly rang true amongst the mothers I interviewed. During the New Labour years, there were a number of different parenting and childcare manuals on the market (Hardyment, 2007). In making my selections, I was informed by a television show, *Bringing up Baby*, screened by Channel Four in 2007, which highlighted three distinct approaches that were all influential during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and which continued to be significant during the New Labour years.

The first approach was one advocating a strict routine in terms of feeding and sleeping – first introduced by Truby King (1924). In this approach the mother was advised that the child should be fed on a regular feeding schedule, not be held too much and that the child should sleep in between feeds – a sleep that should occur in a cot with no feeding or rocking to sleep. This approach promoted the idea that children should adopt predictable rhythms, learn to self-soothe and become



more independent. The second approach – advocated by Dr Benjamin Spock (1958) – was one in which mothers were presented as the intuitive expert of their child and told to ‘trust themselves’ and their own judgement. They were encouraged to feed and hold their child in ways that felt more ‘natural’ to them – so a marked change from the advice of Truby King. At the same time, this approach also emphasised the importance of medical expertise which informed guidance about eating, sleeping and a range of other aspects of baby care. The third approach – pioneered by Jean Leidloff (1975) based on her study of an indigenous population of Venezuela, the Yequana – was one in which children were seen as having a constant need and yearning to be with their parents, particularly their mother. In this approach that came to be known as ‘attachment parenting’, parents were encouraged to carry their baby as much as possible and have the child sleep with them at night. Breastfeeding was also strongly advocated in this approach, as was feeding the baby whenever it demanded. The thinking in this approach was that a young child needs continual care and attention and that by always being there to offer this, parents would create a secure, strong basis for the child which enabled the child to become independent at a later stage when it was ready.

Awareness of these different, contradictory approaches led me to select three of the best-selling manuals that were published during the New Labour years which promoted these different methods. These were:

- Gina Ford (2002) *The New Contented Little Baby Book: The Secret to Calm and Confident Parenting*;
- Benjamin Spock and Robert Needlham (2005) *Dr Spock’s Baby and Child Care: The One Essential Parenting Book* (eighth edition);
- William and Martha Sears (2005) *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know about Your Baby from Birth to Age Two*.

The Gina Ford book advocated a strict routine approach, the Spock and Needlham book was an eighth edition of the original text which told parents to 'trust themselves' but within a context of medical expertise and guidance, and the Sears book set out the approach and case for attachment parenting. As well as these particular manuals I also looked at a range of other best-sellers which included Tracy Hogg (2001) *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer: How to calm, connect and communicate with your baby*; Heidi Murkoff, Arlene Eisenburg and Sandee Hathaway (2004) *What to Expect: The First Year*; Melissa Corkhill (2006) *Green Parenting*; and Liz Fraser (2007) *The Yummy Mummy Survival Guide*. I also looked at two manuals published by the NHS and distributed to parents via midwives: *Birth to Five* (DH, 2007a) and *Pregnancy* (DH, 2007b).

These different manuals offered a range of distinct and diverse approaches, which was significant in itself because it suggested there were different ways to parent (see also Hardyment, 2007). But the manuals also contained some similar and unifying messages about parenting including, for example: the idea that mothers were usually more active in the day to day care of their young children than fathers were; that there were certain ways in which to parent most effectively (albeit with very different messages about how to make this happen); a partial recognition of diverse family forms but a general message that a two parent, heterosexual family was the 'normal' context in which to parent; and the idea that good children were largely the product of good parenting and nothing, really, to do with socio-economic opportunities or constraints (see also Marshall, 1991). The manuals I selected drew upon, to different extents and in different ways, dominant, residual and emergent forces about parenting that pointed to interacting tendencies that were part of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. I explore the presence of these different tendencies in the chapters to come.

My second source was *Supernanny*, the reality TV show that focused on educating and training parents to deal more effectively with their 'unruly' or 'badly' behaving children. *Supernanny* was the most well-known of a variety of reality TV programmes such as *Little Angels*, *The House of*



*Tiny Tearaways*, and *Nanny 911* that all focused on the education and training of parents to enable them to deal more effectively with their children. *Supernanny* could be described as a powerful UK institution<sup>3</sup> in that many people knew of it – certainly all of the parents I interviewed. There were also spin off books including Frost (2005) *Supernanny: How to Get the Best from your Children*, and Frost (2007) *Confident Baby Care*, an accompanying website ([www.supernanny.co.uk](http://www.supernanny.co.uk)), and a Wikipedia entry about the show (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supernanny>). Several series of UK shows were screened by Channel Four between 2004 and 2011. In analysing *Supernanny*, I made use of her books and episodes from series two which, at the time of analysis, was the only series available from the Channel Four website ([www.channel4.com/programmes/supernanny/episode-guide](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/supernanny/episode-guide)).<sup>4</sup>

The *Supernanny* books and TV episodes were analysed with reference to what they suggested about the ideological dilemmas I had located and the ideas about parenting they promoted. In considering the content and format of the show, and the sentiments about parenting that were promoted, at least two sets of ideas were apparent. The first was the idea that parenting did not always come ‘naturally’ and that parents should therefore take personal responsibility for developing parenting skills and expertise with the help of experts like Jo Frost, the *Supernanny*. The second was the idea that parents must take personal responsibility to work – if this had not come ‘naturally’ – to develop particular parenting strategies and approaches. The notoriety of *Supernanny* and the circulation of the ideas it promoted demonstrated the powerful influence of popular culture in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, as well as the emphasis it gave to a therapeutic culture of self-reinvention and personal responsibility that I discussed in chapter one (see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008a; Ouellette and Hay, 2008b; Lunt, 2008). Indeed, in being evoked by

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<sup>3</sup> It has also gone international and is aired in a number of countries round the world including a USA specific version.

<sup>4</sup> As Series Two was first screened in 2005, it was also a series that parents I interviewed would have had available to watch. It was also a series that policy makers would have been aware of before the publication of *Every Parent Matters* in 2007 and related parenting speeches around the time of its publication which made links between its parenting skills agenda and parenting TV shows, and *Supernanny* in particular.



politicians to justify a policy focus on parenting skills, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, *Supernanny* and the ideas about parenting it advocated, pointed to and promoted a particular structure of feeling about parenting: one that positioned parenting and the personal responsibility for developing appropriate parenting skills as popular and legitimate issues for public discussion and consumption.

My third source was *Mumsnet.com*. The New Labour years saw the emergence of the internet as a hugely popular form of information and communication and, as part of this, there was an emergence of interactive websites for parents about parenting. One of the most well-known of all the parenting websites was *Mumsnet* and the presence and popularity of this website demonstrated how new social media contributed to the shaping of the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. *Mumsnet* was known, particularly, for its interactive talk amongst parents with the subheading of the website being 'by parents, for parents'. But it was also well known because of the recognition and endorsement it received from celebrities and powerful politicians including Gordon Brown MP (the most recent New Labour PM), David Cameron MP (the coalition government's PM) and Harriet Harman MP (New Labour's deputy leader and former Minister for Women), who would do live web chats with *Mumsnet* participants.

The growing popularity of the site during the New Labour years, and its focus on parental accounts and expertise, was also demonstrated by the range of books published by the founders of *Mumsnet* including Foster, Longton and Roberts (2003) *Mums on Babies: Trade Secrets from the Real Experts* and Joffe (2010) *Babies: the Mumsnet Guide*. What became immediately obvious from browsing the *Mumsnet* website and spin-off products was the vast array of issues and challenges that had become associated with parenting. Articles and posts on all manner of topics were covered from advice and suggestions about baby names, condolences and support for people who have suffered miscarriages, still-births or problems conceiving, and tips and discussions about how best to tackle child development and behavioural issues ranging from breast-feeding to potty training or

children's interaction with other children. There were also multiple posts about child care and when or whether to go back to paid employment following the arrival of a child, posts on siblings relationships and reviews of products and paraphernalia that claimed to aid in the raising of children. And like *Supernanny*, *Mumsnet* also encouraged a focus on personal responsibility for working through issues and challenges relating to parenting in ways that took up ideas of a therapeutic, self-help nature (see also Orgad, 2005).

In analysing the content of *Mumsnet*, I regularly reviewed appropriate threads and postings about the ideological dilemmas I had identified, as well as relevant extracts from the *Mumsnet* books, and considered the ways in which these examples furthered understandings of these. I also made use of its own internal search engine to consider particular issues that arose during my analysis of the other sources. The generic ideas forwarded through *Mumsnet* about parenting included: the idea that mothers would be more involved and interested in parenting (seen not least by its name *Mumsnet*); the idea that 'good' parenting could be understood and experienced in multiple and diverse ways; and the idea that parents themselves were the *real* experts. As indicated, the site also worked to forward the idea that parents would take personal responsibility for learning about and applying skills and attributes associated with 'good' parenting.

Taken together, these examples of popular culture during the New Labour period demonstrated and included a range of different perspectives about parenting approaches and challenges. The various parenting manuals, *Supernanny* and *Mumsnet*, like the policy documents, were analysed for patterns relating to dominant, residual and emergent forces and what these suggested about a structure of feeling about parenting. Although I made brief reference to some of the manuals, *Supernanny* and *Mumsnet* in the previous chapter, ideas and examples from them are used much more extensively in the chapters to come.



*Interviews with parents*

My final source was interviews with parents. Although Williams focused his attention on a range of cultural texts as sources for locating various tendencies making up a structure of feeling of a particular period, he did not make use of interviews. In this section, I therefore begin by discussing why I chose to include interviews and how I feel this contributed to my own research, as well as to the structure of feeling approach more generally. I then discuss how I selected people to interview and how I went on to conduct and analyse the interviews.

Williams' academic specialism was English literature and drama and so, in exploring the forces making up structures of feeling, it was hardly surprising that he chose to focus his attention on cultural texts such as novels, theatre productions and periodicals and magazines alongside policy and legislation of the time. But, for me, there was a question of how people themselves – in this case parents – were directly involved in the making, shaping and inhabiting of a structure of feeling and how, in these processes, they were agents in and of it. As Lewis and Fink (2004a: 59) have suggested, people are called upon to 'identify with, and make their own, a set of normalised subject positions and practices of everyday living' in ways that corresponded with dominant tendencies of the time but that:

...there are always alternative subject positions and identities available, always a possibility that the same subject or idea is given different meanings. It is not that there is an endless range of possible identities or meanings available, but the indeterminacy of identity and meaning opens up fields of contestation. (Lewis and Fink, 2004a: 59-60)

These fields of contestation offer spaces for resistance, social change or differential relationships to the dominant. And through these contestations parents act as agents in the making, shaping and inhabiting of a structure of feeling. This sense of agency could be seen, of course, on *Supernanny* and on *Mumsnet* which featured accounts of real life parents. But I wanted to have the opportunity to



speak to parents directly and to be able to probe the claims they made. I chose, therefore, to include personal accounts accessed through interviews with parents as a key source for locating a structure of feeling by exploring the ways in which parents accepted, rejected, pushed or went beyond it and their reasons for such responses. Interviews with parents also seemed particularly useful for addressing the question about how the structure of feeling approach might enrich understanding about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives.

My desire to include interviews was informed further by my interest in ideological dilemmas and the related concept of interpretative repertoires (Billig, 2001; Edley, 2001). As highlighted in the introduction, ideological dilemmas refer to the range of competing ideologies making up beliefs, values, practices and wisdoms of particular cultures whilst interpretative repertoires refer to the range of different rhetorical resources people have available to them to discuss and make sense of these dilemmas. It has been argued that ideological dilemmas and interpretative repertoires form and shape each other: they develop together 'in an unfolding, historical, argumentative exchange' (Edley, 2001: 204). As Billig explained:

If ideologies did not contain contrary themes, they would not provide the resources for common sense thinking, for thinking involves dialogic discussion, or the counter positioning of contrary themes, which can both appear in their way to be reasonable. In discussions, one can hear people jostling with the contrary themes of common sense. This is particularly so when the topics are so explicitly ideological... [and] the aim is to see how the themes of ideology are instantiated in ordinary talk, and how speakers are part of, and continuing, the ideological history of the discursive themes which they are using. (Billig, 2001: 218)

I felt that interviews would give me the opportunity to explore the range of issues and dilemmas parents articulated and negotiated, as well as the range of repertoires they used and what this suggested about a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years: as ideological dilemmas of particular cultures and interpretative repertoires of people within these were said to

form and shape each other, attention to the repertoires and registers that parents made use of could highlight the options and possibilities available to parents in a context of a field of dilemmas.

Therefore, interpretative repertoires, accessed through interviews, but also seen in parental accounts featured in the popular cultural texts, offered nuanced insights into the ideological dilemmas they were part of. Given this, I wanted to explore how parents, themselves, articulated their experiences of parenting – to examine the struggles and contestations parents were grappling with and the strategies they deployed for negotiating and managing these. And from this, I wanted to explore what their repertoires suggested about the ideological dilemmas they were part of, and what revealed about a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. I also wanted to consider what their repertoires suggested about the presence, power and position of policy in their lives.

As well as seeing interviews as an important way of including the accounts, dilemmas and negotiations of parents themselves – as people who inhabited and contributed to the making and shaping of a structure of feeling – I felt that attention to personal accounts was particularly relevant in an era in which so much emphasis was placed on the personal. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, using interviews as a resource would fit with and capture a culture that emphasised and encouraged attention to personal feelings and strategies for working through issues and problems encountered. This perspective was set out by Rose (1999) in his identification of a therapeutic culture of the self in which people were shaped by a cultural context of reflexive individualism (see Giddens, 1991) where they were exhorted to take personal responsibility for learning how to monitor and supervise themselves. This emerging culture of personal reflexivity and responsibility was also one which Gorton (2007: 335) has argued was bound up with the fate and legacy of the second wave feminist mantra of the personal being political: that its meaning became distorted so that ‘the personal and its healing became the solution to problems that were largely collective and social’. While a therapeutic culture of the self that had taken hold at the end of the twentieth



century and beginning of the twenty first could be explored through popular culture, a consideration of its significance further motivated my interest in interviewing parents. This was because of my desire to hear directly about tensions and dilemmas parents articulated and the ways in which they sought, and may have felt compelled, to work through and resolve these in their discussions of parenting.

But which parents to interview and how might I gain access to them? I now turn to a discussion of the rationale and location of my interview sample. I wanted my sample of parents to be made up of first time parents. This was because the first few years of *first time parenting* have been identified as being of particular significance. As mentioned in the introduction, first time parents have to deal with 'a new set of experiences, a new set of relationships and a new sense of self' (Wetherell, 1995: 215). And in focusing on first time parents, because it was the first time, they were *becoming parents*. I also wanted my sample to be made up of parents whose child was aged somewhere between nine months and three years. This was because, as noted in the introduction and in chapter two, the early years of childhood and parenting had been singled out as being a particularly critical for child well-being and development (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000; Zigler, Finn-Stevenson and Hall, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004). Nine months was selected as the youngest age for the child because, at the time of interviewing, statutory maternity pay ended at this point. This opened up dilemmas for mothers and fathers about whether or not the mother should enter or return to paid employment and how, if relevant, they would manage alternative child care. Three years was selected as the oldest age for the child because this marked the end of the identified critical early year period, but also because, at the time of interviewing, children aged three and over were offered fifteen hours of free nursery provision and were often entering a more formal educative period in their lives.

I also wanted to speak to a range of parents. While Williams argued that structure of feeling was 'a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it



that communication depends' (Williams, 1961: 65), he also suggested that it was not 'possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community' (Williams, 1961: 65). I therefore wanted to consider how issues and dilemmas that different parents encountered might have been located in the structure of feeling about parenting and what this said about power relations and the production of social difference and inequalities relating to this. I was motivated, in particular, by an interest in the dynamics of gender in relation to parenting, how this might have varied through intersections with other categories of social difference, and how a structure of feeling approach could enrich understanding about the ways in which various gendered identities and inequalities were shaped, maintained and potentially transformed. In seeking access to parents and in making my final selections of who to interview, I was therefore conscious to ensure my sample included mothers and fathers from a range of socio-economic locations.

My desire to interview a range of parents was motivated by my awareness that aspects of social difference can often be an active and significant part of many people's lives. Yet, at the same time, I did not want to be too overly deterministic. Whilst socio-economic and cultural aspects of differentiation may have been very significant in their lives, perspectives and understandings, I was also aware they may not have been and that other aspects of their personal lives might have been more significant. Parents may have experienced the process of becoming a parent in ways that were not reducible to assumptions about various social categories and positionings – an idea suggested by Lewis and Fink (2004b) when they discussed the notion of excess:

...there are often things in an individual's 'personal' that do not correspond to the expectations and patterns that would seem inevitable when their own biography is read against the wider social context and the social relations of inequality and power. (Lewis and Fink, 2004b: 22)

So while I used social categories and positionings in my search and selection of parents to speak with, I did not want to read too much off from these and I was aware of the potential for parents' varied and even unexpected responses.

My research took place in Oxford, a city which is culturally and economically diverse (see [http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Statistics\\_about\\_Oxford\\_occw.htm](http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Statistics_about_Oxford_occw.htm), accessed 7<sup>th</sup> March 2011). I recruited parents through a range of child care settings and parenting networks including various play groups, children's centres and Oxford Parenting Network. This was done through contacting the selected place of recruitment and seeking permission for distributing a research leaflet that briefly set out my research project, my interest in hearing from parents about their own understandings and experiences and some questions about their age, ethnicity, gender, employment and relationship statuses (see appendix one). This leaflet, which included a tear away slip for interested parents to fill in, was also accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope so they could return it to me easily and free of charge. In some locations, I left the form with a key informant – such as a health visitor or manager of a children's centre – and offered to pick up any slips at a time convenient to both of us.

Many parents expressed an interest in taking part. In cases where the parent identified themselves to me as a lone parent, I only interviewed that parent. When, however, the parent identified themselves as being in a couple relationship I asked if I could interview their partner too. A key reason for this was that I was keen to speak to fathers as well as mothers but the deeply gendered nature of many of the parenting spaces and networks I encountered meant it was usually the mother who returned their expression of interest to me. I ultimately selected and interviewed 23 parents – 15 mothers and eight fathers who represented a range of socio-economic positionings (see appendix two).

The interviews took place in the participant's home at a time convenient to them. Before beginning the interview I briefly outlined what my research was about and what I wanted to speak



with them about. I also made it clear that I would be recording and transcribing the interviews whilst also reassuring them that any reference I made to their accounts would be anonymised and their confidentiality protected. Before I began the interview I asked the parent to sign two copies of a consent form (see appendix three), one for them and one for me, indicating that they understood what the interview would be about and that they had the right to withdraw their consent for me to make use of what they said during the interview encounter. When I was interviewing both the mother and father, I envisaged these interviews would be carried out separately. Given the personal nature of the topic and my line of questioning, I felt that a solo interview would give participants the opportunity to speak more freely to me without having to worry about how their responses might be perceived or contradicted by the other parent. However in one particular case, the interview with Samantha and Gerry (names here, as elsewhere, have been changed), the solo interview model did not work out. I began with a solo interview with the mother with the intention of interviewing the father afterwards. But shortly after the interview with Samantha started, Gerry came downstairs after putting their daughter to bed and sat in the corner listening to the conversation between Samantha and myself. I suggested we combined the two interviews which both said they were happy to do. This meant the interview had a different and added relational dynamic. I was more hesitant to ask certain questions, particularly about their gendered perceptions and experiences of parenting, but it nevertheless offered a fascinating insight into some of the ways in which this couple contradicted each other and the work they engaged in to realign their accounts so as to construct a shared account. I give examples of this in chapter four.

In terms of what I asked parents in the interviews, I did not have a formal, ordered or specific set of questions. This was because I wanted to keep the interviews fairly open and fluid and to listen, instead, to what they chose to talk about and probe them further on some of these issues. I was conscious of the ways in which my own social positioning – that of a white, middle class, female, British researcher in her early thirties who, at the time, was not a parent – produced certain dynamics and power relations within the encounter. In some of my interviews with working class

parents, I was aware, for example, of the presence of defensiveness and defiance; and in some of my interviews with non-white British parents, issues of language and different cultural sensibilities could also be detected. I reflect on the significance of some of this in the chapters to come.

I began the interviews by asking them to tell me about their experience of becoming a parent, usually prompting them to start by asking whether the pregnancy was planned and how they felt when they found out that they were expecting a baby. I did, however, have a sheet of paper on my lap with questions and categories I wanted to cover at some point in the interview which I used as a prompt in probing and asking further questions (see appendix four). The interviews lasted somewhere between one and a half to two hours. The interviews, which I recorded and transcribed, were used to explore parents' own experiences of parenting, the interpretative repertoires they made use of, and how these demonstrated various ways in which parents talked about, negotiated and worked on the ideological dilemmas I had located through my analysis of policy and popular culture.

The interviews were analysed alongside policy and popular cultural texts for recurring themes and tensions that linked in with the ideological dilemmas I had already identified. Yet this occurred in an iterative fashion in ways that further developed understanding of the ideological dilemmas which were part of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. The themes and tensions that emerged from my analysis of the interviews were ones about the gendered nature of parenting; dilemmas about feeding, sleeping, routine and discipline; and anxieties about caring for their child and whether or how to combine this with participation in paid work. I explored the ways in which these tensions and anxieties were spoken of with particular attention to the range of repertoires, contradictions and dilemmas that were evident in their accounts, and how these further pointed to the interplay of dominant, residual and emergent tendencies making up a structure of feeling.



While my interviewees reflected an economically and socially diverse group of parents, much of my analysis in chapters four, five and six focuses on parents who identified themselves as British, all of whom were white. One reason for this was that the British parents I interviewed made up the majority – 18 out of the 23 parents I spoke with – and while I had hoped to speak to British parents from a range of ethnic groups, I was constrained by the expressions of interest I received. But there were two other more significant reasons for focusing most of my analysis on these accounts. Firstly, in the analysis of my interviews with non-British parents, all of whom were recent migrants (from Armenia, Pakistan, Poland and Uganda), the issues raised and the strategies they appeared to deploy for managing and making sense of their experiences were somewhat different to those of the British parents I interviewed. These ‘somewhat different’ accounts, reinforced the sense I had from reading the interviews from my British participants about what made up a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years, as well as alerting me to the idea that this structure of feeling was not just one focused on the New Labour years but also one that orientated itself around British (and possibly English) expectations and experiences. Examples of this sense of difference are teased out in subsequent chapters. The second reason why I focused more on the British rather than non-British parents I interviewed related to language, a point already alluded to, and difficulties understanding what was being said. One interview, with an Armenian father called Albin, was particularly hard to carry out because of an acute language barrier. As a result, I make no direct reference to it in the chapters to come.

### **Developing the search for a structure of feeling: rethinking the notion of feeling**

While the sources I made use of demonstrated a key way in which I developed Williams’ structure of feeling approach, I also extended the approach at a theoretical and conceptual level through the way in which I understood and worked with the notion of feeling. Given what I have already discussed in terms of the presence of a therapeutic culture of the self and the cultural take

up and co-option of the feminist idea that the personal was political, my sense was that there was *not enough feeling* in Williams' structure of feeling approach. Commenting on his use of the word, Williams argued that:

The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasise a distinction from formal concepts of 'world view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. An alternative definition would be structures of experience: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating. (Williams, 1977: 132)

Williams therefore explained his choice of the term feeling over the term experience because experience suggests something that has happened and so describes an element of the past, whereas he wanted to capture the moment in which meanings and values were lived and felt – what he called the experience *in process*. However, his use of the word feeling was one that referred to the public mood that characterised a period. While he saw this mood as something that was taken up



and shaped by individual people, he did not focus on the ways in which aspects and dynamics of people's personal or emotional lives could have been caught up in the making and shaping of a structure of feeling of a period.

Yet as I highlighted in my introductory chapter, my understandings and engagements with the subject matter of this research were profoundly shaped, not only by my engagement in cultural and feminist theory, but also by my own personal experience of becoming a parent and the depth and intensity of emotions that I felt at various stages in this process. As I mentioned, whilst engaged in this research, my husband and I experienced three miscarriages followed by a successful pregnancy and the birth of our first child. I first reflected on the significance of my own personal experiences of becoming a parent whilst writing a chapter about *Mumsnet* in an edited volume called *Rethinking Publics* (see Gambles, 2010 in Mahony et al, 2010). At the time of writing the chapter I had experienced three miscarriages but had not yet become successfully pregnant. My feelings, then, about the topic were ones of grief, anger and bitterness and I felt somewhat anxious about going public with some of my own experiences and emotions. However, I also felt that it was these very personal engagements with the topic – and with the website *Mumsnet* – which had so shaped and influenced what I wanted to say about the dynamic relationships between the public, political and personal of parenting.

Since writing that chapter, I fell successfully pregnant, gave birth to my son, and had a year away from the PhD on maternity leave. During this time I experienced many of the challenges associated with becoming a parent that deepened, further, my understanding and appreciation of the topic and relationships between the personal and political. Therefore while I wanted to retain Williams' meaning of feeling as one of a collective mood or set of sentiments characterising a generation or period, I also wanted to explore feeling at a more personal and emotional level and to explore the ways in which a public mood or set of sentiments was one that penetrated and was shaped by personal, intimate experiences and encounters.

A growing intellectual interest in feelings and emotion from the late 1990s has been associated with what has become known as the “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences (Clough, 2007). The affective turn linked to what Woodward (1996) has described as a cultural moment in which a new economy of the emotions emerged. In summarising the affective turn, Gorton (2007: 334) argued that while some scholars emphasised emotion (which was seen to refer to the social expression of feelings) and others focused more on affect (rooted more firmly in biology and physical responses to feelings) the majority of scholars tended to explore both concepts and the ways in which feeling was ‘negotiated in the public sphere and experienced in the body’. In reviewing a number of key pieces of work in this area, she concluded that:

Work on emotion and affect allows us to reconsider the importance of feelings in everyday life, politics, the media, and in formulating notions of citizenship. The theorization of emotion and affect is particularly important to feminism, a politics which as many of the authors point out, is suffused with feelings, passions and emotions. It is something many of us have come to through passionate attachments and so it is important that we have a theoretical basis for understanding emotion and affect. (Gorton, 2007: 345)

I shared an interest in thinking about the dynamic ways in which feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced by people in the personal and intimate encounters of their daily lives, but I was hesitant to draw too much on this body of work about emotion and affect. This was because of the emphasis such debates tended to place on interactions of the social with the biological – a focus which my work did not explore and did not seek to. I felt, instead, that a structure of feeling approach that worked with the notion of feeling as *both* a public mood and as personal feelings and dispositions, offered much for understanding dynamic relationships between the public, political and personal in ways that focused the analysis on culture and the social.

While I have made visible my own experiences of parenting, it is important to note that these were not the focus of my research. Nevertheless my own personal feelings and experiences



have shaped, in part, the ways in which I selected and analysed the repertoires and dilemmas about parenting that are discussed in the chapters to come. This is because my experience of becoming a parent has made me the subject of New Labour's policy and political rhetoric about parenting; the subject and participant of popular cultural texts geared at parents; and, although I was not a parent when I carried out my interviews, a fellow parent during their analysis. This, I believe, put me in a place where I was better at listening to what I was hearing. Indeed my experiences, which made me realise the intensity of the desires and anxieties characterising the process of becoming a parent during the New Labour years, led me to listen more sensitively. Les Back (2007: 6) has argued that ours is a culture that speaks rather than listens. In and through my research, I sought to do both. This is not to say this research could not have been done unless I had become a parent; but it is to argue that it has been profoundly influenced and, I believe, strengthened through my experiences of becoming a parent – allowing me to hear some things I may have missed though, of course, perhaps discouraging me from hearing others.

In this chapter I have discussed how I made use of, and sought to develop, Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach so as to make it more viable for analysing experiences of becoming a parent, and for addressing my specific research questions. By making use of interview data I was able to draw on and probe personal accounts of parenting which felt particularly appropriate in a context in which much emphasis was given to personal feelings and experiences, and to personal responsibilities for avoiding or overcoming difficulties. Interviews, alongside attention to the ways in which parents appeared in popular cultural texts, therefore enabled me to explore in more depth how parents acted as agents in the making and shaping of a structure of feeling about parenting. Through my awareness of the significance of reflexivity in relation to research, I was also prompted to reflect on and extend my use of the word feeling in the structure of feeling approach. In the chapters to come I draw on my refined and extended structure of feeling approach to consider what

a study of policy, popular culture and personal experiences suggested about a structure of feeling about parenting, and how this approach might enrich understanding about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives. I do this by focusing on a range of issues and examples that emerged through my analysis of my sources. These include: gendered dilemmas of parenting (chapter four); tensions about expertise in relation to parenting (chapter five); and questions about work in the context of parenting (chapter six).



#### **4. Managing gendered tensions and dilemmas**

My interest in the gendered dynamics of parenting was set out in chapters one and three, and in chapter two, I demonstrated the presence of gendered tensions and dilemmas during the New Labour years. I located two conflicting ideals: one in which mothers were seen as willing and able to take up paid employment and fathers were seen as willing and able to be increasingly active in the daily nurturance of their child; and a second which constructed the maternal role as one which prioritised the daily care and nurturance of children and constructed the paternal role as orientated, in the main, around financial provision. This ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting is one that is present in my discussions in all the chapters to come and was a particularly pivotal aspect making up a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. In this chapter I therefore spend time focusing on what was suggested in policy about the gendered dynamics of parenting and the ways in which this aligned with and contradicted popular cultural discourses with reference to the parenting manuals and examples from *Mumsnet*. I then draw on my interviews to explore mothers' and fathers' attempts to manage and make sense of this ideological dilemma and the conflicting messages and feelings it promoted. In reflecting upon personal anxieties and dilemmas about the gendered dynamics of parenting, and interactions between personal anxieties and the wider political and public context, I demonstrate what attention to this ideological dilemma suggests about a structure of feeling during the New Labour years, and what it reveals about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives.

##### **Gender neutrality versus gender specificity: an exploration of parenting in policy and popular cultural texts**

In an exploration of the contestation surrounding the gender neutral term 'parent', Day Sclater et al (1999: 2) posed the following question:

Can parenting ever be a truly gender-neutral activity, or is the ideal of the gender-neutral parent likely to be subverted by socio-economic realities, by the gendered discourses of motherhood and fatherhood, and by the psychological constellations of masculinities and feminities?

As well as pointing to the economic, social and psychological dynamics of gender, this question demonstrates some of the uncertainty surrounding parenting and family life that had taken hold in the UK by the end of the twentieth century (see also Silva and Smart, 1999). Day Sclater et al argued, for example, that in the 1940s and 1950s – a period in which psychoanalytic theories and Government policy came together to promote powerful ideals about mothering and a rigid gendered division of labour (see also Riley, 1983) – questions such as ‘what is a parent’ would have been little more than rhetorical if, indeed, they were asked at all. Yet the ability to meaningfully ask this question revealed how, during the New Labour years, there was much more fluidity about the nature of parenting and contestations about appropriate maternal and paternal roles.

This climate of uncertainty about gender explained, but was also perpetuated by, the adoption of the terms ‘parent’ and ‘parenting’ in policy discourses. These terms appeared frequently in the texts I selected for analysis and were deployed much more often than the terms mother, mothering, father and fathering. *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) spoke, for example, *only* of parents and parenting except in a section at the end when fathers were mentioned in the context of setting out particular challenges:

Fathers have a crucial role to play in their children’s upbringing, and their involvement can be particularly important to their sons...The Ministerial Group on the Family will be looking at ways of encouraging the development of more widespread support for fathers. (Home Office, 1998: 49)



The word father (and mother) did therefore appear but only in a discussion about the difficulties of engaging fathers (and here only in the context of concerns about sons). The document's overwhelming use of the terms parent and parenting could, therefore, be seen as evidence of the way in which New Labour recognised shifts in the gendered dynamics of parenting and how it sought to better support both mothers and fathers in the care of their children. Yet it could also be seen as evidence of New Labour's attempts to *encourage* more fluid gender arrangements and its recognition and commitment to the goal of gender equality. In *Balancing Work and Family Life* (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003), the Government stated, for example, its interest in better supporting parents with reference to an aim of enhancing experiences of gender equality:

For parents, the challenge of organising caring responsibilities and paid employment are all too often a source of stress. For business, with unemployment low, attracting and retaining the skills of those with caring responsibilities will become increasingly important. Ensuring a secure family environment for children, *achieving greater equality between men and women*, and raising the productivity of the workforce, all point to the need for public policy solutions to provide better support and choice for families. (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 5, emphasis added)

Alongside its stated interest in achieving greater gender equality, the Government acknowledged persisting gender differentials in employment amongst parents of dependent children. In particular, it acknowledged that amongst all women, mothers with dependent children were the least likely to be in the paid workforce; whereas amongst all men, fathers with dependent children were the most likely to be employed (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 9; HM Treasury, DfES et al, 2004: 12).

Nevertheless, while emphasis was given to gender neutrality and a desire for progress in relation to gender equality, claims were made in the policy texts that suggested this was being achieved which, in turn, worked to mask persisting inequalities. For instance, in an extract from a policy text exploring challenges of balancing work and family, the Government restated its desire

and aspiration for gender equality by enabling women to participate more in the labour market and men to participate more in family life:

Fathers are more likely to work long hours, and therefore it is generally they who miss out most on the opportunity to share in the upbringing of their children. Supporting greater participation of men in family responsibilities is important to the objective of gender equality, and as important as increasing women's ability to participate in the labour market.

(HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 14)

But it also indicated that things had already changed:

More women are in paid employment, resulting in economic benefits for families, employers and the wider economy. More fathers are playing a greater role in their children's daily lives.

(HM Treasury, DfES et al, 2004: 2)

Mothers are working more...fathers are spending more time with their children...since 1997, responding to these demographic trends, increases in the availability of childcare, extended maternity leave rights, and new rights to paternity leave, coupled with rights to request flexible working arrangements when their children are young, have all enabled more mothers and fathers to find a work-life balance which better suits their family's needs. (DfES, 2007: 2)

This stated desire for gender equality alongside claims this had been achieved revealed some ambiguity and uncertainty, and the gender neutral terms of parent and parenting were useful devices for managing this. As Brid Featherstone has suggested:

The term 'parent' can obscure the multiple and differing investments men and women continue to make in mothering and fathering, and the complexities that may be arising as a result of a range of changes in how mothering and fathering may be being carried out. The term 'parent' can obscure both the fixity and fluidity which are apparent. While it can herald



welcome moves towards gender equity, it can also act as a rhetorical device to obscure and confuse. To give an example, gendered divisions in childcare continue to be entrenched, with women of all classes and occupations doing the bulk of such work, although there is evidence also of some fluidity. The term 'parent' speaks to the fluidity to some extent but not the persistence of many entrenched features. (Featherstone, 2004: 10)

The idea that the gendered nature of parenting was simultaneously fixed and fluid during the New Labour era demonstrates the presence of an unresolved ideological dilemma about parenting that I set out at the beginning of this chapter: that of mothers and fathers moving towards a more equal sharing of paid work and caring for their child *versus* the idea that mothers would concentrate, mainly, on the care and nurturance of their child whilst the father focused on financial provision. The ways in which policy discourses slid between stating desires for greater equality, including having more mothers in the labour market and fathers more involved in the care of children, implying this was not currently the case, and of stating that things had already changed therefore demonstrated flux, uncertainty and the presence of a gendered ideological dilemma in policy discourses.

This ideological dilemma could be seen, too, through the popular cultural texts of the period that I explored. However in the genres I looked at, significantly more emphasis was given to the idea of gender specificity than gender neutrality. For example, in relation to the parenting manuals, all contained gendered assumptions of parenting, though this was conveyed in different ways. In *The New Contented Little Baby Book: The Secret to Calm and Confident Parenting*, Gina Ford (2002) was fairly silent on the subject of gender and did not explicitly state that the main care responsibilities fell to mothers. This could be taken as evidence that gender neutrality was being assumed and promoted. However, at the beginning of the book Ford made it clear she assumed it would be a (married) woman reading the book and the one looking after the baby in the first few weeks:

If your husband is not able to take some time off work for you and the baby's first week at home, try to arrange some sort of help. (Ford, 2002: 32)

While the child care routines set out in the book did not make any reference to gender, this quotation demonstrates Ford's gendered assumptions that it would be the mother who had the primary responsibility for carrying out, or at least overseeing and organising, the care of the young child.

More explicit recognition of changing gendered dynamics of parenting could be seen in Dr *Spock's Baby and Child Care: The One Essential Parenting Book* (Spock and Needlham, 2005). In a chapter on work and child care, the authors wrote that:

We've gone from the idea that a woman's work is in the home to the idea that a woman is only working if she has a paying job. Neither idea makes sense. Raising children is challenging and creative work. On the other hand, if a mother knows that she needs a career or a certain kind of job for fulfilment, she should not give it up simply for the sake of her child. Children do not benefit in the long term from such sacrifices; they need happy parents. For that matter, fathers who find fulfilment in taking care of children ought to be encouraged to make that choice. A growing number are doing just that. (Spock and Needlham, 2005: 396)

This statement ignores the fact that some mothers participated in paid work for financial reasons; nor did it acknowledge the deep conflicts mothers often felt when they were in paid work – issues I explore further in chapter six. However, in relation to the changing gendered dynamics of parenting, this passage demonstrated the authors' attempts at recognising gender fluidity whilst also revealing tensions. In relation to the maternal role, the authors felt it necessary to validate maternal decisions to stay at home – 'raising children is challenging and creative work' – as well as maternal decisions to participate in the labour market by arguing that children did not benefit in the long run if their mother felt unfulfilled. However, from the language used, they appeared to find it easier to justify the decisions of the mother who stayed at home compared with the mother who had gone back to work. In terms of fathers, while they worked to *encourage* fathers to be more involved in child care,



suggesting that a growing number were doing this, the language used suggested this was *not the norm*.

Therefore, the repertoires selected acknowledged gender neutral ideas, whilst also positioning mothers as the ones who would usually retain a main carer role, and positioning fathers as the ones who would usually prioritise financial provision. This positioning could be seen in another chapter of their book entitled 'Father as Parent':

[While] men have been participating increasingly in all aspects of home and childcare...we still think of parenting as women's work. (Spock and Needham, 2005: 385)

It was not made clear who the 'we' in this statement was though possibilities include the authors, the imagined readers being addressed, and society at large. What the (ambiguous) use of the word 'we' did suggest, however, was the authors' assumption of a prevailing sensibility about the gendered nature of parenting of the time: that for all the emphasis on and interest in fathers becoming involved, the view that parenting remained women's work persisted. While there was recognition and acknowledgement of the gender neutral approach to parenting, the idea of gender specificity was therefore presented as more typical of the time.

In *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know about Your Baby from Birth to Age Two*, Sears and Sears (2003) made much use of the terms parent and parenting throughout their book, emphasising a potential position of gender neutrality and inclusivity. Nevertheless, much of the book was addressed to mothers and mothering. This was demonstrated, not least, by the presence of a handful of specific sections dedicated to fathering which suggested that the rest of the book was more for mothers and more about mothering. Moreover, in the passages that did focus on fathering, gender differentiated roles were explicitly stated. In one of three short sections about fathering, it was noted that:

While a preference for mother is natural in the early years, fathers are indispensable. Fathers create a supportive environment that allows mother to devote her energy to the baby...It's the father's job to nurture the mother so that she can nurture the baby. (Sears and Sears, 2003: 10)

This statement demonstrated Sears and Sears' conception of a gender specific approach to parenting and the expectation that mothers would be the main carers. This position was further emphasised in their chapter on working and parenting in which challenges and dilemmas associated with combining paid work and caring for the child were presented as challenges and dilemmas for the mother. Nowhere in this section was the possibility of sharing paid work and child care more equally between the mother and father discussed. In a discussion of alternative carers for children when mothers were in paid work, there was also no suggestion that this could be the father.

These examples from the different manuals support the claim made by Harriet Marshall in 1991 about an assumed gendered division of labour contained within parenting manuals: that 'the concept of sharing is clearly limited' and 'the sexual division of labour is constructed as inevitable' (Marshall, 1991: 82-82). Despite some recognition of the role fathers might have played in the care of children, these parenting manuals continued to promote a gendered division of parenting responsibilities during the New Labour years (see Asher, 2011). This suggested a structure of feeling that contained a gendered dilemma, but also one that assumed a more gender specific resolution to this.

The emphasis given to mothers rather than parents was also to be seen through the rise of the 'Yummy Mummy' phenomenon which emerged and took root in public discourse during the period in which New Labour was in government. While the terms parent and parenting were used as a way of acknowledging and encouraging gender neutral understandings about maternal and paternal roles, the Yummy Mummy discourse placed emphasis on the mother. Moreover, the Yummy Mummy phenomenon was constructed as a modern, up to date and aspirational version of



being a parent. In this discourse, the idea of mothers who could afford the choice of being less involved in paid work and dedicating, instead, time and money to looking after their child and being sexually attractive was promoted. Hardyment (2007: 393) suggested that this discourse was fuelled by coverage given to celebrity mothers as well as 'career women who have smashed through glass ceilings and can afford to mother in style'. She went on to cite America's Yummy Mummy website which described itself as 'a playful and cheeky site for modern mothers' arguing that this demonstrated the way in which it had become 'modern' again, as opposed to 'traditional', to talk of and place emphasis on *mothering*.

The rise of the Yummy Mummy discourse, and its promotion of ideas of gender specificity, could also be seen in the UK through much newspaper and magazine coverage, widespread recognition of the term and publication of books such as Liz Fraser's (2007) *The Yummy Mummy's Survival Guide: How to put the mmmm back into motherhood*. This book, described on the back sleeve by a best-selling magazine of the time as 'must-have reading for the maternity ward and beyond', focused exclusively on the mother's experience of parenting, dedicated 368 pages to humorous advice and anecdotes on becoming a mother, the early months and years of mothering and how, in the process, mothers could – and should – feel and look good. Plenty of advice was offered: to bring your make up to hospital when you give birth; to remain groomed through pedicures and pampering; and to keep yourself and your house looking stylish after the birth. In only one chapter of the book were gendered dynamics and changing relationships between mothers and fathers discussed and in this chapter a gendered division of labour was clearly assumed. As Fraser said:

The number of mums who think they've talked everything through with their partner before the baby comes, and are heading for a cosy family life where Mummy and Daddy both participate in Baby Activities, only to wake up one morning and realise Daddy doesn't want to do anything with his baby at all, is scary. (Fraser, 2007: 323)

Through this statement, Fraser dismissed the ideal of equally shared parenting by evoking the *reality* of the gendered division of labour. Once she had dealt with that, the rest of the chapter concentrated on feelings of jealousy the father could experience as the mother focused much of her energy and attention on the child, and jealousy the mother could experience as the father left home in the morning to go to work. In this context, the advice she offered to mothers was to make sure they still ate with their partners, had sex, resisted any temptation to nag and kept communicating with them, all of which Fraser (2007: 320) said was 'easier said than done, but it's something to aspire to'. The Yummy Mummy discourse might have portrayed a modern, up-to-date version of parenting, but the version it portrayed was one of gender specificity. Attention to this discourse therefore demonstrates some of the ways in which the residual and traditional idea of the stay at home mother was being reworked and taken up by the dominant as a modern, emergent idea.

The popular cultural examples I have drawn upon so far demonstrate some of the ways in which a discourse of gender neutrality and the sharing of paid work and care was acknowledged but also dismissed through the evocation of a gender specific division of labour as normal, natural and desirable. In this respect, these examples highlight tendencies that went against and undermined policy attempts to promote a more gender neutral shared ideal of parenting (although, as discussed above, policy itself also offered an ambivalent set of messages about the gendered ideological dilemma). The tensions bound up with debates about the gendered nature of parenting could be seen on the website *Mumsnet.com*. While the site claimed it was 'by parents, for parents', the title was still *Mumsnet*, one of its spin off books was called *Mums on Babies*, and the majority of users and contributors were mothers. This suggests the presence of interacting ideals alongside the dominance of gender specificity. Yet the uncertainty and ambivalence about this was raised and discussed at various points on the site. For example, one thread in 2004 entitled 'Are mothers and fathers equal?' began:



I've just spent the evening with friends in a lively debate about parenting...would like to know your opinions. Do you think either mother or father is more important? I was of the mind that while there are many, many, many wonderful fathers and a fathers role is VERY important when it really comes down to it, over time, across the world the mother's role is more crucial – before the days of formula babies would not be nourished without a mother...Do you think that there is a special bond with the mother that isn't there / isn't as strong with a father (not for a second belittling the role of the father though) just that there is something *extra* in the mother / child bond. My friend (the opposing side) said that it's completely 50/50 and it wouldn't matter anymore if a child was left motherless than fatherless and the idea that the child is *usually* better off with mother is just old fashioned. It didn't matter about the mother being able to sustain the baby anymore as there is formula milk so that makes the mother and father totally equal. What is your opinion?

(Beccarollover, *Mumset.com*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2004)

In this post, a particular stage was set – an evening with friends – in which the positions of gender neutrality or gender specificity of parenting was set up as a controversy for debate. Beccarollover made visible both positions. But in relation to her own position of gender specificity, she worked to keep the paternal role important, whilst also denying it as being of equal importance to the maternal role which she felt was more significant in the raising of children. Her post sparked an interesting set of responses which included:

In my own situation, I would say that it is probably 50/50 - especially now the children are older. When young, then I was definitely the one they wanted/needed. But perhaps that was because of the way dh [darling husband] and I shared the parenting job - I was a sahm [stay at home mum] for all their early childhood, so obviously was around more to cater for their needs. Whose to say which bond would be greater if I'd gone out to work and dh had been a sahd [stay at home dad]? Now the children are older, they are turning to their father more

and more, although I don't think anything will break the bond they have with me...I would say that each parent (according to their role – carer / provider) is equally important, but probably the mother is more so in the eyes of the child. (Freckle, Mumsnet.com, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004)

The logical, fair part of me says 50/50 – Dads are of equal importance. My heart says Mums have superiority. That's terrible isn't it? (Marthamoo, Mumsnet.com, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004)

Yes, some dads do a great job and some women aren't very good at being mothers. But in general, women do and have always done either all the childcare or the lion's share. There may be individuals who differ from the general rule but I still think mothers are more important to children. (Eddm, Mumsnet.com, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004)

I think it's more to do with who is the child's primary caregiver, and who is more emotionally nurturing in the home. Would think that in SAHD [stay at home dad] situations, that the father would be the one the child relies on more. (Earlybird, Mumsnet.com, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2004)

This thread and the various posts that were part of it demonstrated the depth of contestation about the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting. Some of the responses appeared to promote the idea of gender neutrality, as seen, for example in the accounts of Freckle and Earlybird. Yet there was much uncertainty and ambivalence demonstrated in the post of Freckle, but also in the post from Marthamoo in which she juxtaposed the logical part of her (that corresponded with an ideal of gender neutrality) with her heart (which emphasises gender specificity and the superiority of mothers as carers of their children). Marthamoo's move to position this as a 'terrible' thing to say also suggested how this view was one she perceived to be somewhat taboo and against the grain of what ought to be said during this period, even though it may have been commonly felt. Indeed, a position of gender specificity seemed to be the position to feature most strongly across most of the posts of the thread.



Policy discourses appeared to promote an idea of gender neutrality, at least in relation to the labour market participation of mothers, as a dominant tendency. Yet this could sit somewhat uneasily with ideas promoted through popular culture and with people's gender specific feelings and experiences. It also suggests, again, how gender specific ideas could be positioned as residual *and* emergent, and that these ideas interacted in uncomfortable ways with the dominant, as well as challenging the very idea of what constituted the dominant itself.

### **Gender neutrality versus gender specificity: how mothers and fathers experienced and managed the uncertainty**

So what did the personal accounts of parents I interviewed suggest about this ideological dilemma? When the parents I interviewed were asked whether they thought being a mother was similar or different from being a father, ambiguity and uncertainty was often articulated and a range of contradictory rationales and repertoires were evident. These revealed the presence and power of the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting, some differential positions to it, and various ways in which parents sought to make sense of and manage their ambiguities and their ambivalence. One couple, interviewed separately, responded to the question of whether the roles were similar or different in the following ways:

In the very early stages, particularly if you're breastfeeding, there is a kind of maternal thing that's different from the father. But I think, just thinking about this couple I know in the village, where they're kind of doing half and half, I would say that...if you are there all the time, what makes the difference is whether you have the experience of being on your own with them...I think that's probably the key thing that makes a difference rather than gender.

(Amy)

The first two weeks, in particular, I thought we were very much equal partners in it, um, you know, working together to get through it...um and I think after I went back to work, I think things did change...Amy was taking, um, more of a leading role I suppose, because you're just spending that much more time with him [their son, Freddie]. Um, getting more confident and um, you know, knowing what was going on and that kind of thing. Um, it's not that we're not in it together, but I think after those first few weeks, it did change a bit. It became less equals and a bit more Amy being mum. Yeah, I think the difference between mum and dad started to happen then. And it, not in a bad way, um, but it did make, you know, it does make a difference. She's more aware of him and what he does and the right thing to do. (Paul)

Amy's explanation that in the early stages, 'particularly if you're breastfeeding', there was something different about being a mother from a father appeared to draw on and construct gender differences in parenting as something related to nature and the biological. Yet she also drew on other views and experiences by evoking a couple who lived near to her who shared child care in more equal ways. In drawing on this example, she offered an account suggesting any differences in parental roles were more about the time spent with the child rather than the gender of the parent which implied or at least recognised a more fluid version of the gendered dynamics of parenting. The presence of these different repertoires and rhetorical choices revealed an aspect of the ideological dilemma bound up with the gendered nature of parenting which could therefore be characterised as a juxtaposition of the biological versus the social. The evocation of breastfeeding could be seen as a rhetorical resource that explained, in part, differences between mothers and fathers as biological; yet the biological was also denied with reference to differences in parenting roles being about the time parents spent with their child.

Amy's partner Paul appeared to support the denial of biology as an explanation for gender specificity when he said that he felt things were equal in the first two weeks when he was on



paternity leave. After that he suggested, however, that Amy began to take the lead role because she was spending more time with their son, therefore explaining gender differences as something linked to time and to social and economic factors rather than the biological. Indeed, as Paul went on to say:

At the end of the day somebody's got to earn some money to pay for everything [laughs]. So it would be great if we could both be off and playing with him and looking after him and that kind of thing but, um, at the end of the day I've got to go to work. (Paul)

This extract further shows the ways in which Paul used particular rhetorical resources to indicate his interest and willingness to be with his son to suggest a gender neutral idea of parenting; yet he also evoked the material context and the necessity for him to be in paid work to explain the juxtaposition between his desire to spend more time with his son and his actual experiences.

Just as repertoires evoking the biological, social and economic jostled alongside each other in parental accounts of their experiences of the gendered dynamics of parenting, so too did themes and repertoires of the traditional and the modern. This could be seen in the following extract from my interview with a mother called Sarah:

My role is just to be there and look after her [her daughter] during the day and make sure she has her nappies changed and her feeds, just so she's organised really...It just happened that way. I mean I'm sure Nathan would like to look after her all day while I went to work but at the moment that's not a possibility because his job is so good...This sounds silly, but I think it's something that goes back to the olden days as well, it's like expected of the man to go to work and provide for his family while the woman stays at home...And that is what is the expected role really. (Sarah)

Sarah presented an image of much gender specificity in their parenting arrangements and a fairly traditional gendered division of labour. She suggested, for example, that Nathan would have liked to have spent time looking after their daughter but this acknowledgement of a potential gender neutral

and gender fluid approach to parenting was quickly shut down: firstly, by mentioning Nathan's job being so good (which highlighted the use of the material context to explain their situation); and secondly, with reference to societal expectations of a nuclear family in which fathers acted as financial providers which she linked to the 'olden days' and evoked as a traditional but actively residual idea.

Nathan, Sarah's partner, also demonstrated uncertainty and ambiguity about the gendered nature of their parenting. Nathan, a young, aspirational working class father, articulated a view in which he supported Sarah's interest in maintaining a traditional division of Labour:

I don't begrudge Sarah because I want her to spend as much time with Sophie as... (Nathan)

But his statement was quickly qualified with a contradictory view, in which he made visible his desire for her to be more ambitious in terms of her participation in paid work:

But I think that there's, between me and Sarah, the big difference, and it's the thing that frustrates me the most with Sarah is, er, that lack of ambition. Whereas I've got a lot of ambition and I wanna go places, I wanna go places and I wanna go far, you know I wanna do well in my job and, you know, I'm willing to work hard to do that. So far it's paying off and with Sarah, she hasn't got that ambition, or the motivation umm, to er...she's difficult 'cause she's got Sophie, she's happy in this place, that's it, whereas I'm not. You know, I don't wanna live in a flat. You know, I wanna carry on doing well in my job, I wanna go further, you know, I wanna go on nice holidays and have a nice car and to do things and, er...I wish she would want the same as me to do, in order to go out and get a job and so, you know we can provide, we can afford more...because like a lot of women in my office have all got young kids and they go out to work and I tell Sarah this and she doesn't understand, she doesn't, she just thinks I've had a kid, I don't have to do nothing until she's ten... (Nathan)



By stating his desire for Sarah to be more interested in being in paid work, Nathan drew, in part, on gender neutral ideas about parenting. Yet he did not make any mention in this extract of being prepared to reduce his working hours or change his behaviour in other ways that might enable Sarah to do this. Instead he evoked an idea of time in which he thought mothers who were at home with their children were doing 'nothing'. This extract therefore demonstrates Nathan's partial take up of the gender neutral ideal about parenting in that he wanted Sarah to have a job; but he did not address potential change in his own attachment and commitment to the labour market which might render Sarah's participation more difficult. Nor did he recognise that the activities she was involved in as one's which constituted hard work.

However, in other parts of the interview Nathan acknowledged that parenting was hard and that he did not do as much as he perhaps should have to help Sarah:

I found it really hard being a father. Adapting to looking after her, and to feeding her, and to changing her nappy and to just being a father...I put a lot of pressure on Sarah because I don't think I was there, to be honest. Whether it was keeping the house tidy or taking the baby...I don't really like 'em [babies], I find them hard when they're small. (Nathan)

I discuss the dilemma of work in the context of parenting in chapter six, but here, for the purposes of an exploration of the gendered dynamics of parenting, this statement makes clear Nathan's own role in avoiding much of the work of parenting and how, in the process he promotes a gender specific idea of parenting. Though at other points, he suggested he would have liked to have been more involved in the work of parenting, so promoting a gender neutral ideal, but he claimed this was discouraged by welfare professionals and by Sarah:

When it comes down to it, when it comes down to going to the midwives and going to the scans and that, you may be encouraged, you may be up for it, and wanting to do it, but

when you get there, if those people aren't interacting with you the same as they are as the women, then it makes you think, well actually, do I need to be here? (Nathan)

Sarah won't let me do nothing, so I didn't really feel part of it, and again, it's going back to feeling lonely and on your own and a bit worthless, as if you're not needed, but you want to be there and you want to do so much and help them but you can't, 'cause she wouldn't let me. (Nathan)

These various extracts from Nathan demonstrated, therefore, his ambivalence about whether the care of a child involved work – an issue and tension I explore further in chapter six – and whether he wanted to take part in this activity. They also revealed some of the ways in which he worked to manage and make sense of his uncertainty: by suggesting that an ideal of gender specificity about parenting, and the idea that mothers would be the primary carers, was being promoted by the welfare professionals he encountered, as well as by his partner Sarah; and that this prevented, in part, his greater involvement in the care of his daughter and a more gender neutral approach to their parenting.

The ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting – and tensions between the biological versus the social, and the traditional versus the modern – could also be seen in the interviews I carried out with Alison and her partner Ross:

I think there's sort of a society expectation that women will be the mother, but then equally, the minute I've become a mother, that's all I want to do, you know, so it's, it's a self-driven thing too... I do think that women are generally, I think we're just conditioned to be a bit more, like when Lily's in the room, every fibre of my being is constantly aware of what she's doing and I don't think um, a lot of men are necessarily that tuned in. Um, I just think it's just instinct...I suppose, I do, I definitely have more of a need to spend time with Lily than Ross does... Like you know, I feel ill if I don't whereas he just misses her, do you know what I



mean. So I think, what I'm trying to say is that society takes it too far but I do think there's a genuine stronger desire to be a parent in a mother somehow. (Alison)

Equality is essential in any relationship...um, but that's not to say we need to do the same jobs in the same way...I think whatever you say about these things, men and women are different and men and women's responsibilities, not responsibilities, but men and women's natural sort of parenting urges, they are urges, it's almost like sexual urges, you know, are different... I can have less than Alison and I think that's a mother, father relationship. I think that I, I think that I can comfortably accept less time with Lily than Alison can. (Ross)

These two extracts featured a set of rhetorical devices that drew simultaneously on traditional, modern, biological and social ideas about parenting and demonstrate further the tensions parents experienced. In Ross's account, the importance of equality was mentioned, which appeared to lend support to the idea of gender neutrality. Yet he said equality did not have to mean that Alison and he did the same jobs, which worked to support a more traditional set of relations (albeit nested in a more modern framework of negotiation). Ross then evoked the biological with reference to different parenting urges of mothers and fathers so as to explain, make sense of and manage the differences between him and Alison in relation to their parenting roles and dispositions. In Alison's account, she acknowledged the problems of societal expectations that women will be the main carers so positioned herself on the social side of the tension between the biological and the social; yet she went on to say that she wanted to be the main carer and talked about her genuinely stronger desire which drew on and reproduced both the traditional and the biological.

The interview extracts featured so far suggest that parents had a range of rhetorical strategies available to them – strategies which were present to varying degrees in policy and popular cultural discourses. Yet the rhetorical strategies parents' drew on were not neatly or clearly made. Instead, parents were aware of multiple and competing possibilities and at points drew differently on these in ways that offered contradictory, complex and uncertain versions. This suggests that as

well as being shaped by a wider context of flux and uncertainty, parents were also active in the making and shaping of it. Indeed, attention to this flux and uncertainty in the accounts of parents demonstrates the presence and power of the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting that was so much part of the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years.

The presence and power of this ideological dilemma was made clearer through contrasts between the accounts of many of the British parents I interviewed and those who were recent migrants to this country. In the accounts of some of the migrants, there appeared, for example, to be less hesitancy and uncertainty about gender, particularly in the accounts from fathers. As one Pakistani father said:

Children spend more time with their mothers...I'm at work most of the time, 6 days a week, I'm out for about 10 to 11 hours...I think the mother is more and more sort of upbringing of children in general, 'cause I'm more and more with bread-earning. That's what I think. That's how nature made it, as I believe. (Mahad)

This extract, which drew exclusively on repertoires of nature and the biological, offered a more certain statement about the gender specific division of labour. While the phrase 'as I believe' alluded to his awareness about tensions and dilemmas, it also worked to reiterate his claim and close down the debate. Naja, a Ugandan woman I interviewed, also spoke of her husband's more gender specific idea about a division of labour which, again, drew on repertoires of the biological:

Whenever David [her son] would cry, Joseph [her husband] couldn't manage it. And he [David] was breastfeeding, so Joseph really thought it was me who had the solution for everything. (Naja)

Yet when I asked Naja whether she thought mothering and fathering were similar or different she, herself, demonstrated more flux and uncertainty:



They should be similar but I think, maybe people, depending on their background, or when the man is working, the, everything else at home is the woman...that's how it is, but I don't want it to be...I want to sit and talk about what to do, as a team. (Naja)

The suggestion that there was less uncertainty about gender roles in relation to parenting amongst some of the non-British parents I interviewed was one that therefore appeared to have its own gendered dynamics: that ethnicity and nationality intersected with gendered positionings, and in these examples, the extent to which they felt ambiguity and uncertainty about the gendered nature of parenting.

The need to make sense of and manage contradictory feelings and experiences of being mothers and fathers, articulated particularly by many of the British parents I interviewed, was also deeply relational and something that parents in couple relationships had a lot more to say about than the lone parents I spoke with. The relational aspects of this work could be seen in the joint interview I carried out with Samantha and Gerry. In response to whether they thought mother and father roles were similar or different, they said:

Samantha: I think in Rosie's [their daughter's] view we kind of perhaps have different roles. 'Daddy is the one who comes home and plays with us and makes us laugh a lot', although I do as well, um 'mummy's the one who will kiss it better, mummy's the one who's there to help us and if we hurt ourselves, she's the one that we go to, or if we're upset, it's mum that we'll go to'...

Gerry: ...I feel a bit differently. I think it's [to Samantha] because of how you sort of saw your mum and dad. My parents were never different in that way. I always seemed to have a laugh with my mum and my dad, so I found in that sort of respect, I found, I would see both of us playing with Rosie and laughing and joking...'cause my parents were always sort of fifty-fifty in that respect.

Samantha: Right. Maybe that's just how I see it then, maybe I see it differently to how it is...because I do, I mean it sounds like I don't play with her and we don't laugh together and we do. I mean today, I had the day off and we had a lot of fun together, we do silly things and we jump up and down in puddles and chuckle...

Gerry: I don't know...I would probably see them [the roles] the same but I don't know what kind of bond a mother forms with a daughter...[To Samantha] I mean I don't know if you have an equal bond with Rosie 'cause you carried her for nine months.

Samantha: [to Gerry] I don't know really 'cause, again, for me, I don't know how you are, how your bond is, but I would say it's pretty similar, I think we both have a deep bond with her, I don't think mine would be any stronger than yours because I carried her. Yes I did, but she's your daughter the same, the same...

This dialogue between Samantha and Gerry demonstrated relational dynamics at work in the process of explaining and managing contradictory feelings and experiences of being mothers and fathers. Samantha began by stating that maternal and paternal roles were different. She did this, however, by animating her daughter's voice to articulate this, which Wetherell (2001: 20) has argued is an example of a change in footing often deployed in the context of sensitive or controversial claims (see also Goffman, 2001). This suggested that Samantha was somewhat uneasy about the statement she was making and by the end of the extract, given what Gerry said, she had shifted her position and said the roles were 'pretty similar', that 'she's your daughter the same, the same'. The dialogue between Samantha and Gerry also saw Gerry shifting his position. He started by evoking intergenerational relational dynamics by referring to his parents' relationship with him – which he described as 'fifty-fifty' – as a repertoire and resource to counter and explain the differences in his and Samantha's perceptions and accounts. By the end of this extract he had moved, however, to a somewhat different position by referring to his uncertainty about the strength of the bond between mother and child reflecting on whether Samantha's experience of being pregnant with their



daughter might have impacted differently on the bond and the relationship they both have with their daughter. These shifts suggested much uncertainty within people's own accounts – accounts which were shaped in dialogic interaction with others (see Maybin, 2001; Holquist, 1990; Holland and Lave, 2001).

As well as the relational work mothers and fathers engaged in to make sense of and manage their perceptions about mothering and fathering, relational dynamics were also evident in mothers' and fathers' accounts when they explained and sought to justify – but also in the process promoted – a gender specificity in the day to day experiences of parenting. As one mother said:

If I'm candid, ummm, I think, I think that probably, as a mother, I've been a little, I've wanted to take the primary role...I mean, if he changes her nappy and I'm in the room, I sort of say mmm not sure if that's right. And I mean, I did it the other night when I was supposed to be asleep, like I've got one eye open. So, ummm, I think there's part of me that has, umm, bagsied everything...I think I have probably ummm, done a bit too much of that but at times, probably Pete's gone along with it too much...but he's wonderful and he does lots of other things around the house, the cooking, and lots of other things that actually make the house tick, and, you know, is really helpful. He certainly pulls his weight...[but] I think in my more reflective moments I would say I have probably hijacked the time. (Fiona)

And from another father:

I mean if it was up to me, I'd, you know, I wouldn't mind staying home, you know being a good, the main caregiver, that sort of thing. Absolutely fine, you know, I've always wanted to be involved...you know, right in the nitty gritty, changing nappies, that kind of thing...I'd have been quite happy if Ellie had gone back to work and I stayed at home full time, and, um, that would have been fine for me, I'd have just done a bit of writing here and there...she earns

more than me...she's always earned more than me...but you know, she wanted to spend time with him [their son]... (David)

Both extracts suggested an awareness of the ideal of gender neutrality in which mothers and fathers were more sharing and fluid in terms of their parenting. Yet this mother and father made use of a range of rhetorical resources and repertoires to explain and make sense of the fact that their own arrangements conformed more to a more gender specific arrangement in which the mother was the main carer. David acknowledged, for example, that his partner Ellie earned more than him but he said that *she wanted* to spend her time caring for their son. The line he used 'if it was up to me' is an interesting rhetorical device for suggesting his own modern, gender neutral credentials whilst also acknowledging and managing the gender specificity in his partner's and his daily experiences. The desire of mothers to be more involved in the day to day care of their child was articulated in the extract from Fiona. She made use of repertoires to suggest she was aware of taking over in the daily parenting activities, but also that she felt slightly uncomfortable or guilty about this through her use of the terms 'bagsied' and 'hijacked'. This range of rhetorical devices enabled her to demonstrate her awareness of the ideal of gender neutrality – something she further worked to suggest by reference to Pete doing 'lots of other things around the house' – but to also explain and justify their more gender specific set of arrangements.

The desire of mothers to be more involved in the day to day care of their children could therefore interfere with the father's interest in being more involved and could work to prevent this. The ways in which these tensions were usually resolved – with the mother taking the lead in the caring role – could result in fathers claiming to feel shut out or somewhat isolated from the parenting experience. This could be seen, albeit ambivalently, in the extracts from the interview with Nathan cited earlier in this chapter, and the range of resources and repertoires available to make sense of and manage this could be seen in the following extract from my interview with Paul:



I think...things are very much, they do feel as if they are biased towards the mother. I think, you know, there's good reasons for a lot of that particularly these days where there's such an emphasis on breastfeeding. Um, but yeah, I think it, it can feel a little like it's very much focused towards the mother. However much you try to avoid it...you do end up falling into the traditional stereotypes. I mean it was, before Freddie came along, we were both working, much more even in terms of the shopping and the looking after the house and that kind of thing. And now Amy does it all. That is quite a big change... I think it's great not to have to go to the supermarket and now Amy does my ironing and that's great. But on the other hand, having done that for myself for quite a long time, or together, um, it is quite strange. Um and certainly thinking about daft things like going shopping and what's in the fridge or freezer. I used to know. But I haven't got a clue now [laughs]. So I mean, in, I think it perhaps does make you more dependent on each other because you're not sharing things in the way you used to. It used to be we both earned money, we both did jobs and looked after each other, but now, I earn the money and Amy spends it [laughs]. Which is fine, um, I've got no problem with that, but... (Paul)

This extract demonstrated Paul's uncertainty and unease about being less involved than his partner in the daily care of their son and in their adoption of a more gender specific division of labour. Paul acknowledged there were good reasons for this by citing the emphasis placed on breastfeeding. In doing this he evoked an example linked to the biological to explain the profound shifts towards greater gender specificity in their responsibilities for the domestic elements of their relationship. Yet in saying 'however much you try to avoid it', he indicated something of a desire for, or at least recognition of, a more modern gender neutral version of parenting. His account therefore demonstrated the presence of gender neutrality (as an ideal to aspire to) and gender specificity (in practice) and in trying to manage the mismatch of principle and practice, he evoked breastfeeding and a repertoire of the power of the biological.

Tensions felt in the context of gender neutrality and gender specificity were also evident amongst fathers who had a high level of workplace stress but who also had to manage this alongside an expectation that they would participate in the care of their child. For example, Ross said:

I've got a massive workload and I need to stay at work. I reckon if I could stay at work three days a week until 7, I'd say I could do that very easily and it would be very useful for me to do that and I wouldn't really have a problem doing that 'cause it would mean I wouldn't be stressed. But I can't. I'm not, because I have to come home and look after a child, you know...And that's not, I'm not complaining about that, 'cause I love looking after a child, it's a wonderful thing. But in terms, but work-life balance stuff, fucking hell, I mean it's a nightmare. It's horrible and it's the one thing I really, really struggle with. I've got work to do and work doesn't stop being work I've got to do because I've got to go and look after a child, you know. I want to be able to stay at work 'til 10 o'clock at night and I can't. You know, if I have to get work done, I won't be able to get it done and I can't because I've got stuff to do. And being tired is part of it but it's not, I mean Lily sleeps quite well, the big part of it is simply being at home and providing the priority which is the duty of care. (Ross)

The extracts from the interviews with Paul and Ross both demonstrated how fathers struggled with tensions between ideas of gender neutrality and gender specificity relating to parenting. Paul felt somewhat uncomfortable about the traditional stereotypes he and Amy appeared to have taken on; whereas Ross struggled with the 'nightmare' of recognising that being at home and caring for his child was the 'priority' which jostled with pressures he experienced in relation to 'massive workload' – issues and dilemmas I explore further in chapter six. In Paul's account, his use of the repertoire of mutual dependency in describing his new relationship with Amy could be said to be a way of seeking to manage his feelings of unease about the gendered nature of their parenting. And in Ross's account, it could be said that he worked to manage the tensions he felt in relation to his paid work



and the care of his child by distancing himself through his use of the phrase 'a child', rather than saying 'his child' or naming the child as Lily, when discussing the pressures he felt in relation to care.

For all the emphasis parents placed on the gender neutral ideal about parenting, it is worth highlighting how uncomfortable and uneasy mothers and fathers could feel when the gendered emphasis on caring or earning roles was reversed. I use here an example from the joint interview with Samantha and Gerry. Samantha usually worked four days a week in paid employment, something she said was very important to her because she wanted to contribute to the household, but also because it was an important aspect of her identity in that she wanted time to be herself too. Gerry worked full time saying this was necessary financially, which was something other fathers emphasised when discussing why they worked the hours that they did. However, in the extract below, Gerry and Samantha discuss how they felt when Gerry was made redundant and Samantha temporarily shifted to full time work:

Gerry: ...I wasn't very happy to [laughs] not contribute to the household at the end, again really.

Samantha: I was happy to do what I could, um, in the whole working five days because I knew it was only temporary. And because I knew sooner or later it would be over. I wouldn't want to go back to five days a week now, I can't do that, I cannot miss out on my mummy and Rosie day.

Gerry: That first Friday I could tell that you...

Samantha: ...no, I was really upset at work all day, it was, that was harder than my first day back at work.

Gerry: You didn't wanna go and I knew you didn't wanna go and I didn't really want you to have to go, but [laughs] in the end, needs must.

I asked Samantha why it was harder:

Samantha: I don't know, I think maybe 'cause I'm so used to having the best of both worlds, in a degree, in that I get my day with just me and with just Rosie and I was so used to that, and also having my time at work and so I could be me, but that was my mummy day and that, it still is very important to me that that's the day I share with my little girl and so it was really hard, that was really difficult...

Both Samantha and Gerry's comments indicated unease: his with the laughter that accompanied his statement about not contributing to the household and his subsequent laugh that preceded the statement 'needs must' in the context of Samantha working five days a week; and Samantha's with the difficulty she felt about having the 'best of both worlds' disrupted through the loss of her 'mummy and Rosie' day. This unease suggests that for all the emphasis given to the idea of gender neutrality, the idea of gender specificity in relation to paid work and parenting felt somewhat more comfortable for them even though Samantha worked in paid employment four days a week. This suggests how gender specificity could be achieved not only through a complete gendered division of labour but also through strategies whereby the mother spent just a little more time than the father focusing on the care of their child.

This chapter has explored the presence and production of an ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting through policy, popular culture and personal accounts. Flux, ambiguity and uncertainty could be seen in policy and popular cultural discourse, albeit flux and uncertainty that manifested itself and worked to find resolution in different ways: policy discourses placed a particular emphasis on stressing gender neutrality whereas popular cultural discourses veered more to the idea of gender specificity. The enormous amount of ambiguity and uncertainty in relation to the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting could be seen, too, in the accounts



of many of the parents I interviewed. This was particularly so in the accounts of British parents in couple relationships. Their accounts demonstrated how they were aware of the dilemmas and the different ideas and principles of gender neutrality and gender specificity. Yet their accounts demonstrated how their own experiences of the dilemmas were messy and contradictory and drew, variously, on ideas of the biological and the social and the traditional and the modern. In the main, these parents appeared to articulate feelings and experiences that worked more with gender specific ideals yet their experiences were also influenced and shaped through ideas of gender neutrality.

From this analysis, it is possible to see that policy, popular culture and personal accounts all contained and perpetuated a gendered ideological dilemma but that there was ambiguity, contradiction and slippage between (contested) principles and (contested) practices seen particularly in the parental accounts. This highlights how essential interviews were alongside policy and popular cultural texts in the location of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years – for this structure of feeling was one that held, contained and relied on contestation and negotiation of the dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting and its ambiguous and uncertain resolutions. As well as beginning to point to what made up a structure of feeling during the New Labour years, this chapter has also begun to suggest different ways in which people possessed, and were positioned in relation to, this structure of feeling: that gendered flux and uncertainty was something experienced more by British parents in couple relationships – a claim I explore further in chapter six in my discussions of work in the context of parenting. In exploring the ways in which gendered dilemmas contributed to the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour, this chapter has also begun to suggest how the presence, power and position of policy in parents' lives was deeply gendered in its effects, albeit in ways that interacted with ethnicity/nationality and relational statuses. I continue to explore these dynamics through a consideration of an ideological dilemma about expertise in the next chapter and an ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting in chapter six.

## 5. Managing expertise

In my explorations of the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting, it was possible to see ambiguity and uncertainty in policy, popular culture and parental accounts. This extended to other aspects of parenting and one of the ways in which this was managed was to draw upon ideas of expertise about parenting and what was best for the child. Yet where this expertise came from, and what was best for the child, were matters of much contestation and suggested a second ideological dilemma. In this chapter, I explore this dilemma by considering competing ideas of expertise in the context of parenting. Expertise was set up as external expertise that came from the claims of research evidence and from 'tried and tested' advice offered in popular cultural texts; yet emphasis was also given to parental intuition and personal expertise based on the parents' knowledge of their own child.

In this chapter, I begin by demonstrating the presence of the ideological dilemma about external versus personal expertise in policy and in popular culture with reference to the parenting manuals, *Supernanny* and *Mumsnet*. I then explore specific examples of the dilemma that emerged through the interviews as issues of much contestation and concern. The first example considers dilemmas about infant feeding, and the second about parental styles and approaches for the daily management of parenting. The ideological dilemma about expertise and the examples I make use of to explore this emphasise further the gendered nature of parenting. This is because decisions about infant feeding revolved around mothers' willingness and ability to breastfeed, and because decisions about parenting styles and approaches were often worked through by mothers in the early weeks and months of their child's life when the mother was on maternity leave. Yet consideration of the ideological dilemma about expertise also revealed dynamics of class which were bound up with the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. Indeed, the classed nature of the dilemma – and the structure of feeling it was part of – could be seen through the different ways in which the middle and working class mothers I spoke with perceived and took up ideas of external



expertise. My analysis suggests that dynamics of ethnicity and nationality were also apparent and that attention to this, alongside gendered and classed dynamics, demonstrates differential relationships with the structure of feeling about parenting.

Many of the parents I interviewed recognised tensions between different forms of external expertise and their own personal experiences; and, through the two examples I draw on, I demonstrate how many parents made sense of and managed these tensions through repertoires about *what worked for them* and / or *their child*. This chapter therefore demonstrates different formulations and meanings of a 'what works' discourse that was utilised in policy, and considers what this suggests for the location of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. It also considers what attention to the ideological dilemma about expertise, and strategies deployed by different parents to manage this, reveals about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives.

### **Competing ideas of expertise in policy and popular culture**

In the policy documents I analysed, competing and contradictory messages about forms of expertise could be seen. On the one hand, parents were told that parenting, and 'good parenting' was something that was intuitive, *ad hoc* and patched together: 'many parents get by through a combination of instinct, advice, reading and family support' (Home Office, 1998: 7). Such a statement promoted the idea of parental intuition and the idea that, through this intuition, parents were the experts in looking after their own child. Yet parents were also told that parenting, and 'good parenting' in particular, was something that required a specific set of skills and attributes which suggested there was external expertise about parenting that parents should draw from. This position could be seen through the policy emphasis on enhancing midwife and health visitor

support, the development of Sure Start, and the provision of other educative measures such as parenting classes (see Home Office, 1998; MacLeod, 2004).

This contradictory message about expertise could be seen in the following extracts from Alan Johnson MP, then Secretary of State for Education, in the foreword to *Every Parent Matters*. On the one hand, he acknowledged that:

Being a parent is – and should be – an intensely personal experience and parents can be effective in very different ways. (DfES, 2007: 1)

Yet this statement was immediately followed by a caveat about the importance of external expertise:

However, we also have a growing understanding, evidenced from research, about the characteristics of effective parenting. (DfES, 2007: 1)

These extracts show the presence of the ideological dilemma about personal versus external expertise in policy discourses: there was acknowledgement of the idea that being a parent was personal and that parents were effective in a range of different ways; yet particular emphasis was placed on the idea that research evidence had located specific ways of parenting ‘effectively’ (though what was effective was not actually defined). This contradiction demonstrated clearly the wider tension between ideas stemming from the therapeutic culture of the self that Rose (1999) had identified – in which people were expected to take personal responsibility for monitoring, supervising and transforming themselves – and the rise of parenting as an important public and political issue which needed to be got ‘right’.

The emphasis placed on research evidence and external expertise linked in with the idea of evidence-based policy that had found much favour with policy makers during the New Labour years (Oakley, 2002; Young et al, 2002). As Becker and Bryman argued:



...the notion that policy and practice should be informed by research evidence has accelerated in recent years. It is associated with the slogan 'what works' as a justification for public policy action. 'What works' suggests that unless we can be confident of success we should not waste public funds on new initiatives. Evidence-based policy as part of the performance ethic within the 'new public management' argues that effective and efficient public policy – and good returns to investment for taxpayers – requires that we understand what works before we spend. (Becker and Bryman, 2004: 42-43)

There were, however, a number of critiques of evidence-based policy. These included concerns about the values and interpretations underlying the research on which the evidence was based; questions about the generalisability of such evidence; difficulties taking up the evidence given the messy and contested nature of politics and the policy-making process; and a tendency to select only some of the evidence (see Becker and Bryman, 2004: 51). Problems with an evidence-based and 'what works' approach to policy in the context of parenting were furthered in two particular ways.

The first was the deeply personal nature of parenting which meant research evidence contributing to ideas of external expertise collided with ideas of parental intuition and personal expertise that were, often, just as forcefully advocated. These contestations could be seen in the extract above from Alan Johnson MP but also in popular cultural texts of the period. One particular example came from the Dr Spock manual. This manual emphasised the idea of parental intuition and personal expertise through the central claim and ethos of the book that called upon parents to 'trust yourself: You know more than you think you do' (Spock and Needlham, 2005: 1). Yet, through the reams of medically based advice and guidance on all aspects relating to caring for a young child, it also promoted the idea of external expertise that parents could and should make use of.

The second problem was the contested nature of the evidence and what constituted external expertise itself. One way in which this contestation could be seen was through an analysis of the different ways in which the authors of the various parenting manuals claimed their expert

status. For example, a repertoire of medical expertise was used in two of the books. In the preface to Spock and Needlham (2005) readers were told that Dr Spock had given generations of parents comfort and reassurance through his 'warm, straightforward and reassuring' voice 'that made it seem as though the doctor were in the room talking to you' (2005: xxi). Sears and Sears (2003) also positioned themselves as experts by stressing their medical training and practice as seen through the repeated use of the 'Dr' prefix in front of William Sears' name (or 'Dr Bill' as he was often referred to in the manual) and the R. N. (registered nurse) after Martha Sears' name. Yet unlike Spock and Needlham, Sears and Sears, a married couple, also made a feature of, and drew on the repertoire of, their hands-on experience of parenting:

We have not only written this book – we have lived it. In the Baby Book we share with you our experience in parenting eight children and caring for thousands of others during thirty years in paediatric practice. (Sears and Sears, 2003, foreword 'from Dr Bill and Martha')

This statement saw Sears and Sears acknowledging but also trying to reconcile and move beyond the ideological dilemma about expertise by combining their external medical based expertise with their personal expertise gained through parenting their own eight children.

Whilst Sears and Sears sought to deal with the dilemma by emphasising both their medical and personal expertise, Gina Ford dealt with it in a different way by dismissing the detached and external claims of doctors and psychologists, stressing instead repertoires of personal expertise which, for her, had been gained over the years through her professional experience in working as a *nanny*:

What is so different about my book is that it comes from years of hands-on experience. I have lived with and cared for hundreds of different babies. I offer real and practical advice on how to establish a good feeding and sleeping pattern from day one, thus avoiding



months of sleepless nights, colic, feeding difficulties, and many of the other problems that the experts convince us are a normal part of parenting. (Ford, 2002: xii)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Jo Frost, the Supernanny, when she claimed her status by emphasising how her expertise stemmed from personal intuition:

By and large I've simply followed my instincts and observed parents and kids to see what worked and what didn't work. What I've called the 'Involvement Technique', for example, is just what many parents have done instinctively over the years when they have needed to get on with a household chore. The 'Naughty Step Technique' – a way of enforcing a rule by getting a child to think about their behaviour – has probably been around for as long as stairs have had steps and rooms have had corners. (Frost, 2005: 10)

She went onto explain that:

I'm not a parent. That's true. I'm not a paediatrician, either, or a child psychologist. I've had no formal training to do what I do. Which puts me in much the same position as most parents, without the intense emotional attachment (although us nannies have feelings too!) (Frost, 2005: 11)

Here Frost positioned herself as expert but in a way that was more aligned with parents: that because of her lack of scientific training, she was 'in much the same position as most parents'. Frost (in both the TV show, but especially her book) acknowledged a mistrust and scepticism of 'experts', particularly if these experts were not parents themselves. Yet she had to then work up her own claims of expertise. In her book, she emphasised her years of 'real life' experience working as a nanny but, because she was not the parent, her lesser emotional attachment too which she claimed put her in a better place to offer advice: 'when many parents find themselves in difficulties they're too emotionally involved to see the bigger picture' (Frost, 2005: 11). The setting up of her expertise about parenting was also a feature of the TV shows. Early on in the show, Frost would turn up at the

home of the family she had been asked to help looking professional in a suit, heels and wearing her hair up. She would then spend the day with the family before delivering her verdict and diagnosis of their problems. In one particular episode, Frost's diagnosis was met, for example, with tears from the mother and nods of recognition from the father and Frost set about seeking further reassurance that her diagnosis was correct. Frost asked the mother, Caroline: 'Am I lying with what I am saying'? Caroline, through her tears, replied: 'Not at all. You said everything that I would have said if I knew how, in the right way. You said it perfectly' (*Supernanny*, 2005a). With the thorny issue of Frost's diagnosis – and her expertise – acknowledged and confirmed, she was then able to return to the house the next day, this time dressed down in jeans and wearing her hair loose to align herself more with parents, and introduce and train them in the techniques and routines she felt would resolve their problems.

The positioning of expertise as personal expertise, be it as a parent or a nanny, occurred in a context of a backlash from parents about the distant and detached expert (see Foster, Longton and Roberts, 2003; Furedi, 2002) which was part of the wider cultural emphasis on strategies and techniques of self-reflection and personal transformation (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999; Gill, 2007; Gorton, 2007). The critique of the distant and detached expert was one that *Mumsnet*, in particular, sought to counter by emphasising that it was the parents posting on the website who were the real experts. Indeed, in the introduction to a *Mumsnet* book, *Mums on Babies: Trade secrets from the real experts*, Foster et al (2003: x) described their website and accompanying book as 'a vast archive of expertise – collected the hard way – by thousands of real parents'. Through this claim, Foster et al positioned *Mumsnet* and *Mumsnet* products as offering parents a range of different options and ideas that stemmed from the personal expertise of *Mumsnet* members:

Whatever the parenting poser you are facing, the chances are that one of Mumsnet's members will have been there already. Their advice is offered in a rather different tone of



voice to the tablets of stone delivered by the parenting gurus: not so much 'do this because it's the right way' as 'this worked for me, maybe it could work for you'. (Foster et al, 2003: x)

While *Mumsnet* claimed its expertise because it featured real life experiences of a range of different parents, my analysis demonstrated how Frost and the authors of the various parenting manuals all had to position themselves as experts which was achieved through different repertoires. Frost and Ford emphasised repertoires of personal expertise gained through working as nannies; Spock and Needham through repertoires of medical expertise; and Sears and Sears through repertoires of both medical *and* personal expertise.

But how did the parents I interviewed respond to contested claims of expertise and further acknowledge and work on this ideological dilemma? I now turn to consider this through two examples: feeding an infant; and parental styles and approaches for the daily management of parenting.

### **Feeding an infant: managing and making sense of competing ideas of expertise**

Official advice about whether to breastfeed or bottle feed has changed over time (Hardyment, 2007) but policy during the New Labour years firmly advocated breastfeeding on the basis of its health and maternal-infant bonding benefits (Home Office, 1998; DH, 2005a, 2005b; DH, 2007a; DH, 2007b; see also Lee, 2007a, 2007b). Official policy advised exclusive breastfeeding for six months and for as long afterwards as mutually desired by the child and its mother. Such a position drew on an 'evidence-based' and 'what works' framework (see for example AAP, 2005; WHO, 2003; WHO, 2007) demonstrating the idea of external expertise that was addressed to parents. Indeed, in a NHS parenting manual, *Birth to Five*, given out to parents by midwives, parents were told that:

Breastfeeding is the healthiest start you can give your baby. By breastfeeding, you are giving your baby protection from a variety of infections and illnesses. (DH, 2007a: 7)

On the same page was a box listing all the reasons why 'breast is best for babies': that breast milk contained, for example, all the nutrients the baby would need, that it would help to develop the baby's immune system, that it reduced the risk of developing allergies and diabetes and reduced the likelihood of obesity later in life (DH, 2007a: 7). A number of reasons were offered for why breastfeeding was also 'best for mums': that it reduced the risk of pre-menopausal cancer, that it helped women lose weight after pregnancy, that it was free, that it could be done anywhere and that it was easier and more convenient than bottle feeding during the night (DH, 2007a:7). The gendered consequences of this advice were, of course, evident and discussed in chapter four.

The section on breastfeeding in the NHS manual was followed by a section on bottle feeding which demonstrated awareness that not all mothers were willing or able to breastfeed. Yet while bottle feeding was admitted as an alternative, it was also identified as an inferior choice. Parents were told that:

Infant formula milk can be used as an alternative to breast milk. But there is a greater risk of your baby developing infections if you choose to bottle feed. (DH, 2007a: 14).

Messages about the superiority of breastfeeding appeared, too, in the popular cultural texts I explored. In the Dr Spock manual parents were informed, for example, of the benefits of breastfeeding (Spock and Needlham, 2005: 238) and then given 42 pages of advice about how to do it. The importance of breastfeeding was advocated particularly strongly by Sears and Sears:

Breastfeeding is a life-style – and a way of feeding. In the early weeks, you will have days when you are ready to toss in the feeding bras and reach for a bottle. But when you realise how breastfeeding benefits mother, baby and family, you will strive to conquer the problems and master the art of providing the oldest and best infant nourishment. Breast milk does good things for baby. Breastfeeding does good things for mother. (Sears and Sears, 2003: 117)



This extract stressed the importance of breastfeeding whilst also recognising that it could be difficult. Yet instead of legitimising alternatives, it called for the mother to work through any difficulties she might experience, and expected that the mother would be prepared to put this work in because of the health and bonding benefits attributed to breastfeeding. Two chapters of their book were then dedicated to informing parents of why breastfeeding was so beneficial, how to do it and how to handle various problems or challenges that might arise.

The claim that 'breast was best' did come up against some challenge. Wolf (2007) argued, for example, that the research evidence on which this claim was made was inconsistent and did not account for other plausible variables such as the role of parental behaviour or socio-economic factors. Nevertheless, the examples from different parenting manuals, as well as policy discourses, demonstrated the dominance of the idea that breast was best during the period. And exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months was presented as the best option in the context of (most of) the latest research evidence and other sources of external expertise.

Gina Ford shared this view: she opened her chapter on feeding in the first year by stating that 'breast is best and the most natural way to feed your baby, as all the baby experts agree' (Ford, 2002: 38). Yet she made parents aware of the difficulties they might encounter:

...despite all the help and support available to new mothers, only 67 per cent of breast-feeding mothers are still breast feeding their babies at the age of one month, the rest having given up after two to four weeks. The most common reasons given by mothers for giving up breastfeeding are: a feeling that they are not producing enough milk; cracked nipples and pain during feeding; the baby is discontented and not thriving; exhaustion due to the baby feeding for hours at a time, often throughout the whole night; or they don't enjoy breastfeeding and start to dread it. I think it is very sad if a mother has to give up for any or all of the first four reasons. If, however, a mother really hates breast feeding, she should not be pressurised into continuing...Having observed hundreds of mothers over the last ten

years, I would like to reassure any mother who absolutely hates breastfeeding that, contrary to some breastfeeding gurus' advice, your baby will not suffer physically or emotionally if you decide to change to formula milk. The most important thing is that you and your baby are happy with what you are doing, which is very difficult if you dislike breast feeding. (Ford, 2002: 38)

A similar message was offered by Dr Spock:

Not so long ago, babies were raised on infant formula as a matter of routine. Today we know that there are real benefits to mothers' milk. Still it is possible to raise healthy babies on formula and many women use it either alone or in combination with breast milk. (Spock and Needham, 2005: 280)

Frost, in her book *Confident Baby Care*, indicated how bad bottle feeding mothers could be made to feel and also tried to reassure them:

I definitely support breastfeeding, but not to the extent of making bottle-feeding parents feel they should be banished off the face of the earth. There are a variety of reasons why you may not be able to, including adoption, illness and certain medications. I know certain women who can't breastfeed because their nipples are inverted or too short. It's okay if you can't or you choose not to. Generations of babies have been bottle-fed and are just fine! Formula is now created to mimic breast milk (minus the antibodies). So don't feel badly, Mum, if for some reason you can't breastfeed or you only do it for a few weeks. It's not proof of your womanhood or your love for your baby. And breastfeeding mums should be kind to other mums who are not. Support one another, rather than judge! (Frost, 2007: 31).

While the idea that 'breast was best' could be seen clearly in policy and popular culture, and was legitimised by reference to research evidence and other forms of external expertise, bottle feeding was also acknowledged, even as it was positioned as an inferior option. All this suggests that



breastfeeding had become a dominant idea within the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years, albeit a dominant idea that had to include bottle feeding as an actively residual tendency.

Indeed, despite the emphasis placed on breastfeeding, bottle feeding remained widespread during the period. According to a survey, just less than 70 per cent of mothers in the UK in 2005 began by breastfeeding their child but a third of these mothers had given up by the time their child was six weeks, and two thirds by the time child was six months (Bolling, Grant et al, 2006). Whilst statistics indicated that initial rates of breastfeeding had increased during the New Labour years (Bolling, 2006), most women still fed their babies with formula during the first few weeks (Bolling, 2006; Lee, 2007a; 2007b). Moreover, statistics suggested that only 21 per cent of mothers exclusively breastfed their child at six weeks, and that only one per cent did at six months (Bolling, Grant et al, 2007; Lee, 2007a; 2007b). These figures indicated the extremely limited take up of official research and advice to breastfeed exclusively for the first six months and demonstrated tensions between research evidence, external expertise and the personal experiences and encounters of many parents. They also suggest just how active bottle feeding was as a residual tendency in relation to feeding an infant.

Of the parents I interviewed, twelve out of the fifteen mothers began breastfeeding their child, a figure that was a little higher than the national average, and continued for varying lengths of time. Many of the mothers I interviewed were determined to breastfeed – ‘adamant’ in the words of one mother, Samantha – whilst acknowledging the difficulties associated with it and the need to be accepting of other situations and decisions. The following interview extracts demonstrate this positioning:

It was really important to me ‘cause I really think it gives you a close bond and so on. I mean on the one hand, I don’t think it’s something you should be prescriptive about and sometimes I do worry that people feel they’ve got to do it and if they don’t, there’s

something wrong with them and so on. But I did... and once he'd got used to it, he was really snuggly and he's a really snuggly baby and I think that's part of it 'cause they get very used to being a part of yourselves. (Amy)

I think I would have been quite disappointed if it [breastfeeding] hadn't of come off. I think I just hadn't quite realised how difficult it could be...having seen friends that have really struggled through, and really persevered, like properly persevered, I didn't realise it could be that hard, so I was probably a bit naïve on that. But it was great that it all worked fine [for me]... (Jessica)

It was important to me, and I really wanted to give it a go. I very quickly had a very healthy respect for how it's not easy though. I don't think I'd necessarily thought it was, but I probably just hadn't thought about it. I had friends who found it easy, friends who struggled, but I hadn't really thought about why or anything. But I became very acutely aware, very quickly that it was not something that you just 'do' which I think is what we're maybe led to believe sometimes... but I decided I was going to do my damndest to do it, but I mean gosh, Ben will tell you there were lots of times when I'm like 'no, I've had enough'...and even when I mastered it there were still times when it was very hard and I was very sore, and I found that very kind of emotional, 'do I do it, don't I do it?', and then not wanting to stop, but equally 'yes', so that definitely added emotion. I never found breastfeeding enjoyable. I think it was something I was really glad I was able to do and I felt very pleased that I'd managed it, but I couldn't empathise with that view of 'midnight and you're sitting there breastfeeding your baby and wondering what a wonderful world it is'... (Debbie)

Breastfeeding was articulated as something that was very important to Amy, yet she also felt a need to acknowledge that it was not the only option. This suggested her awareness of alternative experiences and different approaches to feeding and a sense that these needed to be respected. Nevertheless the fact that she was able to breastfeed, and that she felt it contributed to the close



bond between her and her son, demonstrated how powerfully – and personally – she had internalised the idea that breast was best. This suggests how, for her, her own personal experience aligned with research evidence and external expertise and so there was no conflict or anxiety about this aspect of her parenting. This could be seen, too, in the extract from Jessica. She recognised that many people really struggled with breastfeeding but because it worked out fine for her, she did not need to deal with the disappointment or conflicts of not being able to breastfeed.

The sense of really wanting to make breastfeeding work was conveyed, too, by Debbie through her use of repertoires that emphasised the struggles she had with it alongside her persistence and determination to continue. Her persistence and determination demonstrated the presence and power of policy and other discourses of external expertise about feeding an infant. Whilst her account featured much ambivalence about breastfeeding – ‘do I do it, don’t I do it’ – her persistence enabled her to resolve the tensions between ideas from external expertise with her own personal difficulties because she managed to overcome these difficulties and align her experiences with external expertise. Her persistence also enabled her to resolve the wider cultural dilemma about the importance attached to parenting and the need to get it ‘right’, and a therapeutic culture of the self in which people were expected to take personal responsibility for monitoring and supervising themselves.

The anxieties that mothers’ could feel when they struggled to align their own experiences with ideas promoted by policy and other forms of external expertise could be seen in the interview with Alison. She spoke of a range of difficulties she experienced with breastfeeding, including how painful she found it:

I’d absolutely no idea it would be so painful. Um, and even the midwives who had been just gorgeous throughout the whole birth...they just whacked Lily on my boob...but just straight after the feed, the nipple was very bruised...every time I told someone how painful it was, they’d sort of say, oh it’s ‘cause the baby isn’t latching on properly, or they’d kind of look at

me as if something was wrong and they'd say well surely it stops hurting after a few seconds.

And I was like no it's properly painful the whole way through... (Alison)

This extract shows how welfare professionals were another powerful source of external expertise and Alison felt her personal experiences were being dismissed because they went against the advice the midwives offered and stood for. Nevertheless, despite her initial problems, she also persisted because of how important she thought breastfeeding was:

I think I'd read up a lot about it, just how important breast milk was so it never actually occurred to me to not keep going... But I did cry every time I breast fed...I think my sister was given the wrong cream at the chemist so my nipples got worse and worse, um, so it was like a combination of a blister and a splinter and it was agony...It really, really hurt and it was really upsetting 'cause it was such a bad pain in such a sensitive place and something that was meant to be beautiful, but I think I was just so bolstered by the fact that everyone said oh give it three weeks and it'll start to get better and as soon as I was given the right cream, my nipples cleared up and it became much easier. But the real problem was, I mean Lily just wasn't gaining any weight. (Alison)

Alison had internalised the idea that breast was best, yet struggled to align this with her own personal experiences of breastfeeding. Her anxieties were not only related to the physical pain she felt, but also because her own experiences were different to an image and idea she had that breastfeeding was natural and 'beautiful'.

Nevertheless, despite her persistence, and despite breastfeeding becoming less painful for her after a few weeks, she encountered another problem – that of her daughter not gaining weight. Given this, Alison decided to top up her breastfeeding with bottle feeding:

She was crying all the time and didn't, you know, didn't sleep that well and just was very, very desperate basically. And after about four weeks and she wasn't gaining any weight and



I just didn't think I was producing enough milk so they said to me, look, you know, um 'cause a lot of people feel like that, just try expressing to stimulate your milk flow and I did that and I was just exhausted, you know, like I'd be feeding her for like three or four hours and then trying to express and feeding and expressing, it was just...I just felt so claustrophobic, really sort of um, I mean we tried not to be 'cause Ross and I tried to make a joke of everything, just to make everything manageable but breast feeding was horrendous...I think the, the only, I think that's just sort of quite normal, and I'm glad that I kept going. But the, the only genuine problem, I think was that Lily was just getting thinner and thinner and she was actually just losing weight after like about four or five weeks...I kept saying, look I think I should give her some formula and just unbelievable pressure not to. Um, so I went back, every week, and she was still losing weight and she was just like a little old man, you know, her skin was hanging off her and she just didn't look well and crying all the time and so eventually after six weeks, I saw a health visitor who said look you've tried everything, it's not working so let's give her some formula. She just changed, her personality, after one bottle, she was smiley and relaxed... it just changed our lives really and then she started to gain weight, she started to look like a normal baby, not like a, you know, a little sack of skin.

(Alison)

This extract makes clear the extreme pressure Alison felt about continuing breastfeeding. This pressure came from a variety of sources of external expertise, including the midwives she encountered, that came together to produce a powerful set of ideals about breastfeeding that she had internalised and taken up as her own. Despite breastfeeding being painful for her, she was therefore willing to keep going for the health and sake of her child, and because she believed it was the right thing to do. In this context she drew on the repertoire of humour as a device that she and her partner made use of to manage the difficulties she encountered. Nevertheless, through the ways in which she accounted for her difficulties, she positioned herself as being prepared to do whatever it took to align her experience of feeding her daughter with messages from external expertise.

Alison's eventual decision to introduce top up bottle feeding – a decision she articulated as one about the health and well-being of her child – worked with the idea of 'putting children first' which Ribbens McCarthy et al (2000: 791) identified as a 'non-negotiable moral imperative' in their study of step parenting. Though Alison was aware of ideas promoted in external evidence about 'what worked' in relation to feeding an infant, it could be said therefore that she drew on moral ideals and repertoires of what worked for *her child*.

The idea of what worked and what was best for the child was often conveyed by parents to justify the decisions and approaches they took. This suggests that a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years was one that contained and promoted the idea of doing what was best for your child, even if this sat in tension with ideas stemming from external expertise. Nevertheless, the tensions between ideas of doing what was best for your child and ideas stemming from external expertise – and desires to resolve these – could be seen through Alison's need to gain reassurance from her health visitor that topping up with formula was an acceptable and legitimate strategy.

Despite Alison drawing on ideas of what worked and was best for her child, her feelings of failure and guilt over her decision to introduce bottle feeding was difficult to overcome. This was acknowledged by her partner Ross who felt angry about the way ideals about breastfeeding had affected her:

I'm fully in favour, I fully advocate kind of breastfeeding stuff and think that it's very much the way you should go. But it's a bit bloody Nazi, the NCT [National Childbirth Trust] attitude towards it and I think it guilts, I think it makes mothers feel very guilty if, if, if like Alison, they struggle with it, and she really did struggle with it... she does know the health benefits of all this stuff. So being, being made to feel like an inadequate mother on the basis of, on the basis of not, on the basis of not being able to breastfeed properly is a bit shitty really, as far as I'm concerned. (Ross)



While the ideological dilemma about expertise was often gendered in orientation and address, this extract highlights how fathers could experience and feel the tensions too, albeit in relation to their partner's experiences. Ross accepted the idea that breast was best, yet he also had to support his partner who had struggled to align this idea with her own personal experience. Ross articulates, in particular, his anger about how inadequate Alison had been made to feel. While the dilemmas about feeding a child were felt very strongly by mothers who experienced difficulties with breastfeeding, Ross's statement therefore demonstrates how policy discourses and other sources of external expertise articulating the idea that breast was best could be present and powerful in fathers' lives, albeit in ways that were relational and differently positioned.

While Debbie and Alison persisted with breastfeeding despite their difficulties, another mother I interviewed appeared to be quicker and more relaxed about her decision to switch to exclusive bottle feeding:

I was given some guidance while I was in the hospital, try doing it this way, try doing it that way and I did breastfeed her for about a week, ten days. But then I wasn't very well so she had to go onto formula...But yes, there is a lot of support for breastfeeding because they are very, they'd rather you did that... it just didn't really work out for us. (Sandra)

The illness Sandra encountered was mastitis which involved her breasts becoming engorged. Although it was possible to continue feeding through mastitis – and something that was encouraged in the manuals and through the instructions of midwives and health visitors – for Sandra it became a reason for going against ideas promoted through external expertise. Moreover, it was something that she displayed little anxiety about and it is possible that this was connected with a class culture in which it was much more common for working class mothers to bottle feed rather than breastfeed (see Lee, 2007a, 2007b).

The significance of class cultures in relation to infant feeding corresponded with my own research: the three mothers I interviewed who never breastfed were working class. In one of these cases, the decision not to breastfeed was attributed to a lack of knowledge or awareness about it. As Tina said:

The midwife said to me did you want to breastfeed and I said well I don't know nothing about breastfeeding. I've never been, I don't know anything about it and she said well would you like to try? And I said well, if it was explained and she said alright then, we'll give it a go. But she didn't explain, she just stripped me, laid me on my side, put her in her nappy and laid her there...I nearly squashed her because she was wriggling and I couldn't move, couldn't physically move anyway, I couldn't move my arms and I couldn't get to her and I think if my mum hadn't have come in when she did, I think I could have suffocated her... So from then, I was like no, not breastfeeding, I don't want to do it...Then afterwards, I had a nice, the midwife I knew, who I'd had before... she said well do you want to give it another go and I said I'd try again but she didn't latch on and I couldn't get that much milk ...she probably went 10 hours with nothing...she was obviously screaming her head off, starving hungry and they kept going no, you need to try, keep trying and I was like no, I've had enough, I want to give her a bottle...I thought she's gone over 10 hours without no milk, I've got to feed her. (Tina)

Like Alison, Tina justified her decision to bottle feed with reference to her daughter's hunger. Yet the speed and ease with which Tina appeared to make this decision could have been linked, again, to a class culture in relation to infant feeding as well as the fact that she was less aware of, and so less affected by, the power and pull of external expertise that claimed breast was best. Tina, a young lone mother, also relied a lot on her own mother for advice and guidance and her own mother had not breastfed. In this case, the external expertise Tina drew on came from the personal experiences of her mother.



Another mother I interviewed called Natasha, again a young lone mother, also resisted breastfeeding and in her case refused to even try it. She explained this by saying:

I wanted to bottle feed her. It felt safe 'cause I've brought my little sister up and I know my little sister was on bottles and I was more comfortable and confident feeding bottles than breast feeding, you know...I didn't try at all. 'cause it was, when I was, I couldn't move basically, so other people had to look after her, so that's when I had to make the choice.

(Natasha)

For Natasha, bottle feeding 'felt safe' – she had personal experience of it and felt more confident with it. But in accounting for this decision she also drew on practical constraints – she couldn't move following an emergency caesarean section and her daughter was in a special care baby unit which meant others had to look after her daughter. By referring to repertoires of health constraints, Natasha positioned breastfeeding as physically impossible for her and so, through her decision to bottle feed, she positioned herself as doing what was best for her and her child. Nevertheless she still felt a pressure to breastfeed:

There was a big pressure. Everybody was saying it was best to breastfeed, it was best to breastfeed and all...I was a bit angry with one nurse...she was, I don't know, she was persistent in getting me to breastfeed and I said to her, please, look, this is my first child, I want to do it how I want to do it, yeah. And she was still pressuring me and I took it one step further. I went to the actual main nurse on that ward and that lady never came back to me... it's my first child...my decision, I want to do what I think is better for her...they never pressured me anymore. They let me do what I wanted to do. (Natasha)

Even though she articulated awareness that everybody around was emphasising that breast was best, her decision to bottle feed was further justified through repertoires of what she knew and felt comfortable with. The resistance she put up in relation to these pressures was also something she

emphasised. This in itself demonstrated how she sought to 'answer back' to the powerful ideal of breast being best and she did this by drawing on discourses of what worked for her – though it could also suggest the defiance she may have felt she needed to demonstrate against me in what was a classed interview dynamic imbued with various sets of power relations. Natasha's account juxtaposed external expertise with her own personal experiences and expertise but not in overly anxious ways. Moreover, through her defiance of ideas of external expertise, she appeared to be managing the ideological dilemma – and the classed interview dynamic – by reinforcing to herself and others of the idea that she was, and was entitled to be, an expert in raising her own child.

The example of feeding an infant has revealed an alignment between policy and popular cultural discourses which drew on research evidence to claim breast was best and to set this up as the dominant tendency. In this context, the parents that articulated anxieties were the mothers who struggled with breastfeeding and who felt the need to work to align their own personal experiences with external expertise. This suggests the gendered nature of the ideological dilemma about expertise in that it was mothers who were positioned as being responsible for feeding an infant and for making breastfeeding work. There was also, however, a classed dimension to the dilemma about feeding an infant with middle class mothers feeling – or, at least, performing – more anxiety about their struggles with breastfeeding than the working class mothers I spoke with. This was, I suggested, connected to a classed culture relating to feeding an infant in which working class mothers felt more comfortable with bottle feeding and struggled less to justify this because it was what they and others around them had most personal experience and expertise of. Moreover, in making the decision to bottle feed, they spoke of – and appeared to shore up confidence in – their own experiences and capacity to parent according to what felt right and what worked for them.



## Parenting styles: managing and making sense of competing ideas of expertise

Policy had a lot less to say about parenting styles and decisions about the day to day management of the tasks of parenting than it did about whether to breast or bottle feed an infant. In *Supporting Families* there was mention of the increased availability of health visitors to offer advice on feeding and weaning and concerns parents had about sleep so as to 'introduce a regular sleep pattern and avoid disrupted nights' (Home Office, 1998: 12). An NHS parenting manual, *Birth to Five* (2007) advised parents that the safest place for a baby under six months to sleep was in a cot, lying on its back, in the same room as its parents, rather than a room on its own or in its parents own bed, so as to reduce the risk of cot death. And an NHS website also included a parenting information leaflet, distributed by midwives in hospitals, in which an on demand approach to feeding was promoted: 'mothers should be encouraged to have skin to skin contact and breastfeed on demand' (Breastfeeding Care Pathway, [www.nhs.uk/Planners/breastfeeding/Pages/parenting-information.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Planners/breastfeeding/Pages/parenting-information.aspx), accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May 2011). But, in the main, while there was a lot of policy attention given to the related agenda of parental skills, the issue of how parents managed their children's sleeping and eating patterns was not a particularly prominent policy theme or priority.

The day to day management of the tasks of parenting, particularly the child's sleeping and feeding, was, however, covered extensively in the popular cultural texts I explored. Yet there was much variation and contestation about the advice these texts offered. At one end of the spectrum was the idea of attachment parenting in which babies would eat and sleep when they liked – which supported the NHS feeding advice, but not the advice about sleeping as articulated in *Supporting Families* – aided through the constant round the clock help, nurturance and support of their mother. Advocates of this approach were Sears and Sears who said:

Because you love your baby so much and want to do the best, you are vulnerable to all kinds of advice. Be prepared to be the target of well-meaning advisors who will shower you with much detachment advice, such as 'Let her cry it out', 'Get her into a routine'...If carried to

the extreme, baby training is a lose lose situation: Baby loses trust in the signal value of her cues and parents lose trust in their ability to read and respond to baby's cues. As a result, a distance can develop between baby and parent...The basis of baby training is to help babies become more 'convenient'. It is based on the misguided assumption that babies cry to manipulate, not to communicate. Baby training books and classes teach mothers to go against their basic drive to respond to the cues of their baby. Eventually they will lose sensitivity and their trust in their own intuition. Before trying any of these baby training methods, compare them with your intuitive feelings. (Sears and Sears, 2003: 9-10)

At the other end of the spectrum was the strict routine approach in which babies would begin by feeding and sleeping in regular three hourly time slots with this period gradually lengthening, particularly at night, as the baby got a little older. This approach, which drew on the ideas of Truby King (King, 1924), was revived and promoted by Gina Ford who claimed that:

The routines will teach you how to recognise the difference between hunger and tiredness and how to meet all your baby's needs, which will result in a very happy, contented baby, who is likely to sleep through the night at around six to ten weeks. My advice will teach you how to listen to what your baby is really saying. It has worked for hundreds of mothers and babies all over the world; it can work for you too. (Ford, 2002: xii)

While Sears and Sears emphasised parental intuition and personal expertise, Ford placed little emphasis on this. Her approach encouraged parents to go against this as it could, she argued, produce spoilt and overly demanding children. Ford's approach proved popular with many parents and she was described as 'the most popular baby guru of the new century...whose...books comfortably outsell those of other authors' (Hardyment, 2007: 292). This suggested the idea of routine represented a dominant tendency in relation to parenting styles and could, perhaps, have been linked to the way in which Ford promoted this as a way of enabling busy parents to fit caring



for children in with their participation in paid work (see my discussions in chapter six; see also Thompson et al, 2011: 135-136).

Nevertheless, Ford was not universally popular (see Foster et al, 2003: 190-194; Joffe, 2010: 70-71). As Hardyment commented:

Hundreds of thousands of parents swear by her. Many say that they have turned to her methods after trying, and failing, with the intuitive response approach. However, a substantial number of parents swear at her, spitting out venomous criticism on blogs and web forums. (Hardyment, 2007: 295)

The heated discussions on the *Mumsnet* talk boards were dramatised in a libel law suit that Gina Ford initiated against *Mumsnet* members after they made several defamatory postings about her on the website. These included the allegation that her approach was as baby friendly as strapping ‘babies onto rockets’ and firing them into Southern Lebanon (see RMMLondon, 2007; Times Online, 2007). This demonstrates that while Ford’s ideas, and the idea of routine more generally, represented a dominant tendency during the New Labour years, this interacted forcefully with alternative ideas about parenting styles and approaches.

The depth of contestation about the day to day management of parenting and expertise about this could be seen, further, through the following example from *Mumsnet* in which one pregnant *Mumsnet* member asked for opinions on the Gina Ford book she was reading. She was met with a range of replies including:

Step away from that book!!!! Feeding on demand, as many cuddles as possible, baby sling or carrier. Enjoy your baby being a baby, there’s plenty of time for routine as they get older... my dd [darling daughter] who is now two, was fed on demand, carried almost everywhere, rocked / fed to sleep, we didn’t plan any of this, but she had reflux and screamed in pain

whenever we put her down. But I'm so glad we did do it this way...she is a very happy content 2 year old. (skyeplusbump, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2010)

I started with a three hourly routine, using Gina Ford and the Baby whisperer as a rough guide. He slept in his own cot in his own room during the day when we are home and in his Moses basket at night. Clearly if he is hungry before 3 hours are up, I would feed him but I've tended to need to wake him. The routine has worked so well for us and given us all some structure to the day and ensured that both of us are well rested and well fed. (MrsGangly, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2010)

My DS [darling son] has been a bit of a GF [Gina Ford] baby from 4 weeks old and I found it worked really well for him and I... GF is so controversial and I honestly don't know why when much of it is common sense...I think the best way that I can put it is that, in my opinion, having a routine for your baby will actually give YOU flexibility and more freedom. I felt just by knowing when I was going to be feeding and when he would be sleeping really enabled me to feel 'normal' again really quickly, and he just fit right into our lives...I just can't rate it highly enough... (ksmshoelover, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2010)

I was fairly sure I was going to get DS into a routine when I was pregnant. But he had other ideas, sensibly, and gave us a three week introduction to nightmare parenting, that is colic! By the end of that we rocked, sang, cuddled and fed on demand (which I planned to do anyway) which was how he needed us to parent him. He's a high strung wee beastie so needed that extra support, but he's repaid it back a thousand fold, because he's so very happy, confident and utterly charming at 1. To be honest all babies settle into a routine in time, but it's their routine not Gina's, and by their very nature some babies are able to self settle from a young age and others need to take some time to learn how, the nicest way for them to learn is by feeling safe in your arms. I would be very wary of the book if you want to successfully breastfeed. The bits in it where she says that not following a routine leads to



exhaustion and lack of milk is utter nonsense. Not feeding enough is what ruins supply.

(Poppet, 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2010)

I agree with Poppet - certainly the copy of GF's book that I've got has feeding advice which directly contradicts...the NHS and World Health Organisation's advice that babies should be breastfed 'frequently and on-demand'... (AngelDog, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2010)

The replies from MrsGangly and Klmshoelover offered a range of reasons to support the take up of Ford's routine approach. These included the idea that it could give structure back to the day, that it enabled the child to fit into the parents' lives, and that it ensured parent and child got appropriate amounts of rest and nutrition. This demonstrates the use of repertoires emphasising what was best for the parents and the child in justifying the take up of the routine approach to parenting. However, repertoires about what was best for the parents and the child were also drawn upon by Skyeplusbump and Poppet to explain their rejection of Ford's routine approach. These *Mumsnet* members emphasised, in particular, medical and digestive problems (reflux and colic) their children experienced and why this made it inappropriate for them to take up Ford's routine approach. Medical expertise – NHS and World Health Organisation guidelines – were also evoked explicitly by AngelDog to further support the idea of feeding on demand rather than following Ford's idea of routine. The idea of what was best for the child, seen through terms such as 'happy', 'well-fed', 'contented' that were used across the postings, therefore framed the mothers' responses, even though the mothers adopted different approaches to parenting. But what of the parents I interviewed?

Many of the parents I interviewed – certainly all of the middle class British mothers, though only some of the middle class British fathers and some of the other parents – had read about, or at least heard of, Gina Ford. Many had also adopted a routine approach. A range of reasons were offered for this. One of these was that adopting an approach, any approach, advocated and

explained by one of the baby experts offered a way to manage the range of choices of parenting approaches. One mother said about her and her partner:

We're probably both the kind of people that almost need someone to say 'right do this, just do that' or 'here's a book'... we found it really helpful just to have a suggested way of where you might think about feeding them at this time, and that time, and old friends that have done it that way have found their babies have slept through from 6 weeks or so, which we thought was quite a nice thing...I think there's kind of two camps. I think there's routine and feed on demand...we went with Gina Ford and found that it worked, and we never really looked back. It just felt so natural I think that was the thing that we were really pleased with, that it was like he really liked it, and there's times in the day where it's just play time, you know that you want them awake and you're not feeding, so you always knew he was going to get enough play to sleep, enough food, and within weeks he was sleeping for 12 hours, and 2 hours at lunch. (Jessica)

Through the articulation of her desire for a book or someone to tell her what to do in the context of her daily parenting, Jessica demonstrated the importance she attached to external expertise. However, she also was aware that there was much contestation in relation to this expertise and offered a 'what worked' (for her and her child) repertoire to explain her take up of Ford's approach.

The presence of this contestation about expertise was also visible in the following extract from a *Mumsnet* edited collection in which an impassioned case for the attachment parenting style was offered:

Attachment parenting is about following your own instincts, thinking about how the baby / child feels and doing what feels right. Why do so many people battle with their consciences about letting a baby cry, or letting them sleep alone, just because that's what modern society tells them to do? (Footprint, in Joffe, 2010: 187)



Here the idea of parental intuition was mobilised to support an attachment style of parenting and, as in the extract from Jessica, through repertoires of what was best for the child. In positioning attachment parenting as something which went against contemporary norms of the time, and claiming that most parents battled with their consciences in terms of the ways in which they went about their parenting, Footprint suggested that the idea of external expertise, particularly an external expertise advocating a strict routine approach, had become dominant. Presenting one's position as counter hegemonic or excluded by the dominant is a particular discursive tactic and, through deployment of this tactic, Footprint demonstrated how ideas of routine were dominant but that ideas associated with attachment parenting were actively residual and emergent forces in the structure of feeling.

The idea of attachment parenting being an actively residual and emergent presence could be seen, too, in two of my interviews with non-British mothers. Rafia, a Pakistani mother, spoke, for example, about the ways in which her daughter would always sleep on her; and Jolanta, a Polish mother, said that her son never went to sleep unless he was being pushed in his buggy or sleeping in her bed and that, at 18 months, he continued to feed regularly through the night. That it was the non-British mothers I spoke with who were more open to an attachment rather than a routine style of parenting further suggests how the structure of feeling that held an idea of routine as dominant appeared to be a particularly British structure of feeling. Indeed, in an interview with Sandra, a British working class mother, who had watched the *Bringing up Baby* TV programme that I used to inform my selection of parenting manuals, an attachment parenting approach was described as 'tribal':

There was a programme on, I was talking about it earlier to a friend actually...You had three different ways of bringing up children and one was very much like the Gina Ford, one was a lady that was the complete opposite and then they had one that was based on tribal women, how the baby's always strapped to them, the baby sleeps in the bed. Um, very

much together, all of the time. If the baby's not with the mother, with the father, never gets parted from one of the parents. Um, that was a very interesting thing...but you're not supposed to keep the baby with you [while you sleep]...in case you roll over and suffocate it... doctors and midwives advocate you do not have your baby in your bed. (Sandra)

Though Sandra found the idea of attachment parenting interesting, she dismissed it as something that went against external expertise and the recommendations of medical practitioners. The use of an attachment style of parenting by Rafia and Jolanta suggests the ways in which actively residual and emergent tendencies could, in some cases, be particularly present in contexts of social difference; and how the presence of social difference, in this case ethnicity and nationality, could therefore be significant in the reshaping of the dominant and the structure of feeling it was part of.

The take up of routine, and its seemingly dominant position, was justified, as in some of the earlier extracts from *Mumsnet*, with reference to it being not only best for children but also for parents. As a mother of twin boys said:

One blessing of them being on the Special Care Unit, which I've since decided is the one big positive that you get from it having spoken to other parents, is that they're put into a routine from birth without even meaning to, 'cause that's how it works, you know, they're fed every 1 hour, and then every 2 hours, and then every 3 hours, and when they reach 4 hours they're allowed to go home kind of thing, so actually they had that almost instilled...and I never really did the whole 'oh they're crying, feed them' because I'd been totally brainwashed as it were to sort of 'no, they're not due a feed until...', so it wasn't really something I even decided but I'm really glad in a way 'cause actually that meant the next few months were, I think were probably much more manageable. (Debbie)

In this extract Debbie praises the idea of routine because of the ways in which it made things more manageable – something she positioned as being particularly important in a context of having twins.



A routine approach was justified, therefore, as a piece of external expertise and advice that could be used to ward off chaos or unease in the context of coping with the huge transition and upheaval – and lack of personal expertise – of becoming a parent. As in some of the earlier extracts from *Mumsnet*, many of the parents I interviewed were drawn to the idea of routine, even whilst being somewhat dismissive of Gina Ford's overly regimental approach, because of the structure it appeared to offer them and because of the opportunities it gave them to gain back a sense of control in their lives:

And you know, having some kind of pattern to the day like... there were two main books I looked at. One was Tracy Hogg, the Baby Whisperer and the other was, Gina Ford...I found it helpful to read up on different strategies for things like getting the child to sleep, getting them into a rhythm, a routine. And actually, I found getting a routine in my day was just as helpful for me, as it was for Gemma, to give myself some structure back in my day and I think that gave me a sense that I was starting to have a bit more control in my life again... Suddenly going from someone who thinks they had control over their lives, going to work and, you know, suddenly, I'm not in control, I've no idea what to do... And, you know, I think, that trying to...I did become quite, much more regimental than I ever would have imagined [laughs] and, you know, Gemma would feed every three hours and have her sleep at the allotted time, and, you know, I did find that really helpful. (Fiona)

I did read...Gina Ford just because someone bought it for Debbie and said 'don't mock it, please read it', so she sort of read it, and then I sort of read it as well, and dipped in and out of it as is my way anyway. It was horrendous and quite good at the same time... I think the horrendous is the 'at 5:15 now it's time for you to take a little nap yourself'. It pretty much is that bad, but equally some of the principles and ideas around routine were quite good...I want to say it's the best for them, but I think it's probably the best for all of us I think is the honest answer. I think it's easier for us if you know that at this time that they are going to

bed, and then after that you can do things and whatever, and I think for that element the routine has been quite strong. (Ben)

When I first brought her home, I was determined to get myself into a routine. Even though I was still sore, I was determined and now I've kept that routine... Like we'd sit down at say six o'clock. I'll have something to eat and we'll just have a cuddle. Eight o'clock, we'll just have a cuddle and go to bed. Like nine o'clock, it'd be you go to sleep, I'll do my house work slowly and surely [laughs], 'cause I'm still in pain. But that's my own little routine. Like this is how the days are gonna run... It was the way I feel that I could cope. It was the way I felt sure of myself that I could do it, you know. (Natasha)

In the third of these extracts, Natasha, a young lone mother, had not heard of Gina Ford, but she drew on the idea of routine and, like Fiona and Ben in the extracts above, presented it as a way in which she, as a parent, managed with all that was involved – physically and emotionally – in becoming a parent. These extracts therefore suggested how parents could lean on external expertise and the idea of routine in order to cope with the ever evolving and changing challenges of parenting because it enabled them to develop confidence in their own personal abilities to parent.

However, ideas stemming from external expertise, including that of the idea of routine, were also subject to something of a backlash amongst parents during the New Labour years, linked, in part to the rise of a therapeutic culture of the self. This backlash could be seen through the presence and popularity of *Mumsnet*, as discussed earlier, through its emphasis on the expertise of real parents but also in the following extract from a father I interviewed:

I don't think anyone can really tell you, you just, everyone finds their own way...a lot of it is just finding your own way and becoming confident. That's the most important thing...The most important thing, well the most useful thing, is to know, kind of to know your baby. They can't teach you that. So now when Seb cries, I know if he's crying 'cause he's tired or



he's hungry. If he's just trying to get attention or something. Otherwise you wouldn't know, 'cause it's only ever so slightly different... (David)

Yet the idea of parental intuition and personal expertise was also portrayed as something that emerged from a consideration of ideas stemming from external expertise. In the words of one mother I interviewed:

I needed something to be reading, just to, because that's the way I often get my information, I guess, ummm, and yeah, they [the parenting manuals] were definitely useful in terms of you know, giving me something to go on. Otherwise, you know, I felt like I had a completely blank page. There was no framework for me to hang my experiences on. So, having a book that sort of, you know...at least it gives you something to work around. (Fiona)

In this extract, external expertise was positioned as something of great value because it could enable parents to cope, as I suggested earlier, but also because of the way in which it could aid and enable the development of parental intuition and personal expertise. In this way the idea of external and personal expertise became intertwined.

The development of personal expertise through the consideration and take up of external expertise could be seen, too, in the following extract from Natasha in which she discussed why she liked to watch *Supernanny*:

She teaches how to do it right...I don't know, I seem to learn some things from there... I love those programmes. How to like, if the child's crazy, how to calm them down, I do, that's some of the things that she teaches us as what I'm gonna be teaching my daughter... How to discipline and... how they get the crazy children to actually be good children....I mean it's amazing! She's good, because I'm not being funny, a lot of people, they just stress out on their children really, wouldn't they and I, I don't wanna be like that...It's really good for me. That's why I like to watch that programme. (Natasha)

Natasha was deeply resistant to the idea of taking up external expertise in the context of midwife advice about breastfeeding her child. Yet she welcomed the external expertise of *Supernanny*, which reveals different responses to different genres and sources of expertise amongst different parents (see also Skeggs et al, 2008). While a lot of the parents I interviewed were quite sceptical of *Supernanny*, many also indicated they did gain something from it – a view articulated by Sarah who said she found it very reassuring because:

You realise, well actually there are other parents out there who can't cope. And we're just normal, just normal...It's so nice to, its sounds horrible, but you do compare yourself to them [laughs]. Actually, you know, we're so much better than that. (Sarah)

This extract suggests how parents could use ideas of external expertise to reassure themselves of their own competence.

With less official policy advice in the context of decisions about managing the daily tasks of parenting, and no official policy line to fail against, it could be said that there was less anxiety amongst the parents I interviewed in this example than there was in the case of feeding an infant. However, the experience of becoming a parent was often experienced as a tremendous life transition and many parents took up ideas of external expertise, particularly the idea of routine. The idea of routine, even if flexible, was seen by many as a way to manage and ward off the chaos and associated lack of control. Warding off this chaos was also linked to parental attempts at developing competence and confidence in their own parenting abilities. In this way, the idea of external and personal expertise were not necessarily at odds with each other and in many cases, the latter emerged out of knowledge and evaluation of the former.

This chapter has explored the ideological dilemma constituted by the idea of external expertise versus the idea of parental intuition and personal expertise stemming from parental knowledge of



their own child. I looked at the presence of this dilemma in policy and popular culture and the ways in which parents made sense of and managed it in relation to two specific examples. In the example of feeding an infant, policy and popular culture came together to promote a powerful and dominant ideal about the idea of breast being best – an idea which had gendered implications that were explored in chapter four. Many of the parents, particularly the mothers that I interviewed, internalised this idea and the mothers who had difficulties in realising it experienced a lot of anxiety and worked hard to align their personal experiences with it. The example of feeding an infant also had a classed dimension. The working class mothers I interviewed were less inclined to take up breastfeeding than the middle class mothers I interviewed, and if they did take up breastfeeding they felt less anxious about stopping when they encountered difficulties. This could have been linked to a classed culture in which it was considered normal and more acceptable to bottle feed. Indeed, in making the decision to bottle feed, a position that went against ideas stemming from external expertise of the time, these working class mothers presented themselves as having confidence in their own personal expertise about parenting, and made clear the presence of bottle feeding as an actively residual tendency. However the confidence they portrayed could have been part of the classed nature of the interview encounter in which there was a deliberate performance of defiance because of a need to answer back to me, as a middle class interviewer, as well as to the idea that breast was best.

In the case of parenting styles and approaches to the day to day management of parenting, there was less alignment of policy and popular culture. Policy offered piecemeal and contradictory advice – develop a sleep routine, feed on-demand – but did not have a great deal to say in regard to this issue. In contrast, popular culture offered a wealth of contradictory ideas about what was best. In this context, the idea of routine emerged particularly strongly as a dominant strategy that was deployed to ward off the lack of control that often occurred as parents struggled to cope with the transition of becoming a parent. My interviews certainly suggested the dominance of a routine approach amongst the British parents I interviewed. But for some parents, as demonstrated through

posts on *Mumsnet*, and from some of my interviews with non-British parents, an attachment approach was favoured which highlighted the presence of alternative ideas in people's experiences of parenting. This demonstrated a jostling of actively residual and emergent tendencies with the dominant, and suggested how dynamics of ethnicity and nationality could result in somewhat different positionings with the structure of feeling which could, in turn, influence its constitution.

Whatever approach parents chose, the process of managing and making sense of competing ideas of expertise meant that parents would often engage in evaluating external expertise in light of their own personal experiences as part of the process of developing their own sense of parental expertise. While perceptions and responses varied, all of the parents I spoke with recognised tensions between forms of external expertise and their own personal experiences. These were managed by drawing on repertoires about what worked *for them* and *their child* – repertoires that emerged from, and were deeply embedded in, the structure of feeling that placed emphasis upon personal strategies and responsibilities for working through dilemmas encountered.

By emphasising the tensions experienced between ideas of external and personal expertise, and revealing the presence of dynamics of gender, class, ethnicity and nationality, this chapter has suggested further how the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives was shaped, in part, through social difference. Attention to the attempts to manage the ideological dilemma about expertise, which were seen in the parental accounts as well as in policy and popular culture, also demonstrated and reinforced a wider dilemma inherent in the structure of feeling: that of the importance of external expertise because of the importance placed on parenting and the need for parents to get their parenting 'right'; and the need to emphasise parental intuition and personal expertise because of the therapeutic culture of personal responsibility that was part of the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. Much work had to be done in managing this tension and it is to different understandings and practices of work that I turn to in the next chapter.



## 6. Hard-working, responsible parents

In chapter two I pointed to an ideological dilemma that revolved around tensions about work and how it was understood during the New Labour years. On the one hand, work was taken to refer to participation in paid employment. Yet at different points and in different ways it was also taken to refer to the multitude of tasks and responsibilities associated with parenting and the raising of children. In this chapter I explore the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting and the tensions between different ideas of work that were evident in policy, popular culture and personal accounts of the parents I interviewed. I begin by discussing what New Labour had to say about work and parenting responsibilities and consider how this aligned with and contradicted parenting discourses in the parenting manuals and in *Supernanny*. I then move on to explore parental accounts focusing, in particular, on mothers and decisions about maternal employment and the care of their child. I place particular emphasis on mothers, again, because of the deeply gendered nature of this ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting. As demonstrated in chapter four, whilst fathers were being encouraged to take on increasingly active roles in the care of their children, tensions between expectations and experiences of mothers' participation in the labour market and an ideology of intensive mothering were particularly acute.

In exploring the different ideas of work – paid employment and the work of parenting – I also demonstrate the work that parents, particularly mothers, had to do in managing and making sense of this and the other ideological dilemmas discussed in previous chapters. I argue that attention to this self-reflective, deliberative management work that could be seen in parental accounts is critical in the location and understanding of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years. For it was a structure of feeling that revolved around, relied upon and placed emphasis on the idea of hard-working responsible parents. Yet the idea of hard-working responsible parents that was promoted, contained gendered and classed assumptions, and was affected by dynamics of social difference. Attention to these dynamics demonstrates further how a structure of

feeling approach can enrich understandings about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives.

### **Hard-working, responsible parents: competing ideas of work and parental responsibility in policy and popular culture**

New Labour placed much emphasis on the idea of 'hard-working families' though the term was never actually defined. On the Labour Party website, there was a page dedicated to outlining its support for hard-working families in which it was claimed that:

A strong economy is vital for hard-working families who have benefited from ten years of growing employment, low inflation and low interest rates...despite rapid social and economic change we must continue to ensure that all families with children are treated with fairness so that they get the support they need both at home and in the workplace.

([www.labour.org.uk/supporting\\_hard-working\\_families](http://www.labour.org.uk/supporting_hard-working_families), accessed July 2009)

On the same webpage, key achievements included giving new mothers nine months paid maternity leave; the right to paternity leave for all fathers; parents of young or disabled children having rights to request flexible working; and the Working Tax Credit providing help with childcare costs. These achievements pointed to policies that recognised, but also worked to encourage, parental employment. These policies promoted participation in paid work and suggested this interpretation of work was dominant.

However, New Labour also emphasised the idea that parents had responsibilities in relation to the care, nurturance and education of their children. The emphasis given to the work of parenting could be seen in *Supporting Families* in which it was acknowledged that 'it's a hard job to be a parent' (Home Office, 1998: 2). The focus on the work of parenting linked with communitarian concerns that had influenced Third Way thinking in which the rise of dual earner families during the



previous Conservative years (1979 – 2007), and the lesser presence of mothers in the day to day lives of their children, had been perceived as a cause of much concern (Etzioni, 1993; 1996). Etzioni (1993) argued that higher rates of maternal full time working and more consumption-based lifestyles had meant that many parents were not providing children with the attention, guidance and care they needed (Etzioni, 1993: 20). As Churchill explained:

Etzioni (1993) aligned these concerns with more traditional social democratic concerns about relative poverty and the stresses and strains of raising children on a low income and in deprived neighbourhoods. Overall, Etzioni (1993) called for the state to intervene...via the following policies:...parent education initiatives; citizenship education; employer and state support for working parents; investment in quality child care provision and early years services to support families with young children. (Churchill, 2010: 4)

Etzioni's claims had a big impact on the development of New Labour policy. Indeed, alongside policies offering better support to parents in paid work – better leaves and better quality child care provision – the parenting skills agenda, introduced in *Supporting Families*, worked with many of Etzioni's recommendations. This agenda continued to develop over the New Labour years:

Government needs to consider carefully its role in enabling all parents to play a full and positive part in their children's learning and development. (DfES, 2007: 2)

The support parents give for their children's cognitive development is important, as is instilling of values, aspirations and support for the development of wider interpersonal and social skills. Recent research has shown the importance of parental warmth, stability, consistency and boundary setting in helping children develop such skills. (DfES, 2007: 5)

The different ideas of work and sets of responsibilities that parents were called to engage in – especially employment and the work of parenting – demonstrated an ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting. This was recognised, in part, in the following statement:

For parents, the challenge of organising caring responsibilities and paid employment are all too often a source of stress. (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: 5)

Given this, it was stated that government would work to ensure that every child got the 'best start in life' and to 'give parents more choice about how to balance work and family life' (HM Treasury, DfES et al, 2004: 1). Much emphasis was placed on choice in the context of work-life balance. As mentioned in chapter two, this was because choice as a political and policy discourse apparently made personal preferences a dominant principle, but also because it was a very difficult discourse to dissent from (Clarke et al, 2006). Choice in relation to work-life balance was therefore mobilised as a discourse that appeared to resolve the ideological dilemma, but which actually worked to transfer it onto parents – something I explore later in this chapter.

The emphasis on choice included the option of not being active in paid work because of desires to focus, instead, on the work of parenting:

Not all parents can work or wish to do so, and we support and value those parents who want to bring up their children full time. (Home Office, 1998: 22)

Yet the choice not to be active in paid work (except for the first year of a child's life when a range of maternity and parental leaves were available) was increasingly silenced in policy texts. Indeed, in *Balancing Work and Families* the emphasis on work-life balance policies so as to facilitate participation in paid work could be seen through the following statement:

Enabling parents to balance work and family responsibilities can make the difference between their participation in paid work, or their exclusion. (HM Treasury and DTI, 2003: foreword)

The idea of choice in relation to work-life balance and paid work participation was therefore very slippery and had a habit of appearing and disappearing at various moments in New Labour policy texts. One of the key reasons for this slipperiness was the fact that New Labour, itself, was unable to



resolve the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting and the ambiguity relating to this was a key aspect of the structure of feeling about parenting. There was a desire to support and value a range of preferences about the combination of participation in paid work and the work of parenting, including the option of focusing solely on the work of parenting. Yet the juxtaposition between paid work and the idea of exclusion demonstrated how New Labour saw the path to social inclusion as one which required some kind of participation in paid work. Through this, it was possible to see the continued presence of gendered but also class based tensions.

For example, in relation to the gender tensions, many mothers felt a particular unease about leaving their children and claimed what they really valued was time with them. This was a view that was promoted in various research and commentary texts during the period as seen, for example, in an extract from a pamphlet published by the Centre for Policy Studies, a right wing think tank in which the controversial journalist, Christina Odone, claimed that:

Ordinary women – and men – value the whole woman, who can fulfil more than her role as worker. Those who influence and design public policy claim to represent women, but choose to ignore their preferences. Their aim is to get women into full employment, and ease their burden once they get there. Yet this policy satisfies only one in five women – and ignores the wishes of 99% of mothers with young children. (Odone, 2009: 2)

The message that many mothers wanted to be with their children, rather than spending their time in paid employment, was something that had been found in commentary spanning the political spectrum and in more robust research. Indeed, Duncan and Edwards (1999) found that many mothers valued and prioritised time with their children and developed the notion of gendered moral rationalities to explain why many lone mothers (as well as mothers in couple relationships) chose not to be active, or at least not very active, in paid work (see also Duncan et al, 2003). These claims tied in with research suggesting that a mother's desire and preference to be with her child was constituted through cultural meanings attached to 'good mothering' (Woollett et al, 1991;

Wetherell, 1995; Kremer, 2007). Indeed, as discussed in chapter two, the increasingly pervasive ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) called mothers to devote their whole selves to the task of nurturing and educating their child. Towards the end of the New Labour years, 57 per cent of mothers with children under five were active in some sort of paid employment (ONS, Labour Force Survey, 2008). Nevertheless, this meant that 43 per cent were not, which suggested the depth of feeling about the idea of mothers being present with their children and the contestation about what was – or what should be – the dominant idea about maternal participation in paid work.

In relation to class, the emphasis on choice in the context of work-life balance was something that sat uneasily with concerns and policy resolutions about social exclusion and welfare dependency. These concerns arose, in particular, though not exclusively, in the context of lone mothering. Barlow et al (2002: 116) noted that, for New Labour,

Traditional marriage, with two-parent married families, would seem to offer the best way of squaring the circle, for this is the family form that best allows the combination of parenting with paid work. Lone motherhood, in contrast, epitomises the contradiction between paid work and parenting – there is less disposable time for one parent to achieve either at adequate levels. The intricacies and ambivalences of step-parenting, cohabitation and all other ‘new family forms’ just complicate matters and in any case are seen as more likely to lead to family breakdown. In these terms, parenting by both biological parents who are also married is therefore the best and most efficient family form in linking social morality, social cohesion and economic efficiency.

New Labour’s implicit support for marriage partly tied in with the possibilities marriage appeared to offer for a gendered specialisation of paid work and the work of parenting: the presence of two parents enabled one parent to focus on the care of children, whilst ensuring one parent was still able to participate in paid work and take responsibility for financial provision. This resolution of the dilemma about work in the context of parenting was not, however, possible in the case of lone



parenting because if lone mothers focused on the care of their children, they would be dependent on welfare benefits.

The classed tensions in the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting were exacerbated through the parenting skills agenda in which government sought to promote 'good parenting' for the sake of child well-being and development and for the future well-being of society. This agenda, initially articulated in *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998), was more fully developed in later documents including *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) and included the development of midwife and health visitor support as well as parenting education and advice and other kinds of support offered through Sure Start and Children's Centres as set out in chapter two. The skills and attributes parents were called to develop were ones understood to be particularly lacking amongst parents in socially and economically deprived contexts:

...some parents need more help particularly those facing linked problems such as poor educational achievement, health or housing, or unemployment... We also need to target resources on the areas of greatest need. This is what Sure Start is all about. (Home Office, 1998: 13)

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still more likely to experience a range of obstacles to success. Whilst these factors can be overcome, they put poorer children in danger of achieving less than their better off counterparts. (DfES, 2007: 4)

The policy agenda of encouraging parenting skills, which was classed in its address, also intersected with gender which meant working class mothers were often singled out because of their perceived lack of parenting skills and the negative implications this had for their children and society more generally. Gillies argued that:

...attention and concern has focused on a particular sort of mother. She is portrayed as irresponsible, immature, immoral, and a potential threat to the security and stability of

society as a whole. While this type of mother is accused of bad parenting, it is her status as poor and marginalised that sees her located at the centre of society's ills. From New Right to New Labour, tabloids to broadsheets and daytime television to documentaries, working class mothers who do not conform to standards grounded in middle class privilege are vilified and blamed...Parenting is no longer accepted as an interpersonal bond characterised by love and care. Instead it has been framed as a job requiring particular skills and expertise which must be taught by formally qualified professionals. Working class mothering practices are held up as the antithesis of good parenting, largely through their association with poor outcomes for children. (Gillies, 2007: 1-2)

Gillies also suggested that a powerful web of discourses positioned working class mothers as 'inferior, irresponsible or even dangerous' which informed 'the actions of social workers, health visitors, teachers and other professionals' as well as filtering into popular culture and the mass media' (Gillies, 2007: 8). Gillies therefore acknowledged the interplay and mutual constitution of policy and popular cultural understandings of parenting and it is to popular culture that I now turn.

The popular cultural texts acknowledged the idea that many mothers were in paid work seen through statements in the manuals, threads on *Mumsnet* about, for example, dilemmas relating to child care, and on *Supernanny* with some of the mothers featured having full or part time paid employment. Nevertheless, the popular cultural texts focused, in the main, not on these mothers' paid work activities but rather on the details of the work of parenting and the many sets of activities and responsibilities involved – work which, as demonstrated in chapters four and five, was deeply gendered and overwhelmingly associated with mothers and the maternal role.

The sheer range and scope of the work and responsibilities of parenting could be seen from the *Mumsnet* talk boards, with breast and bottle feeding, weaning, sleep, potty training and child development and behaviour making up just a handful of the many categories that were featured. The range and scope of the work of parenting could be seen, too, across the multitude of parenting



manuals on the market. In Spock and Needlham (2005), parents were confronted with extensive information and advice relating to the various ages of their child, with a particular focus on babies and young children, and on specific issues such as infant feeding, young children's emotional development, their safety, and matters of discipline and learning. Although the basic premise of the book was 'trust yourself, you know more than you think you do' (Spock and Needlham, 2005: 1), it was clear that Spock had a lot to say about what constituted the work and responsibilities of parenting.

Sears and Sears' (2003) also presented parents with an exhaustive list of 'smart' requirements for ensuring optimal child well-being and development<sup>5</sup>. These included: a 'smart womb start' (emphasising the importance of maternal diet whilst the baby is in its mother's womb); a 'smart milk start' (with more frequent feeds and a longer period of breastfeeding being most optimal); 'smart moves' (stressing the benefits of carrying the child in a sling so as to offer constant visual and sound stimulations); 'smart play' (discussing educative games and activities parent and baby can enjoy together); 'smart talk' (emphasising the importance of talking with your baby about all that is going on around them); 'smart listening' (with more responsive parents helping their baby feel supported and cared for to aid brain development and future confidence); and 'smart foods' (discussing the importance of giving young children food full of nutrients). These 'smart' rules were then developed and elaborated in sections dealing with children of different ages – the first six months, the second six months and so on up until the child reaches two years of age (the period covered by this particular book).

Sears and Sears (2003) offered advice that often contradicted suggestions found in some of the other parenting manuals. Nevertheless, in outlining the range and scope of parenting activities,

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<sup>5</sup> The word smart has particular connotations with staff training and development with the acronym SMART standing for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART\\_criteria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria)). The use of the word smart in a parenting manual could therefore be seen as something influenced by and further promoting of ideas of evaluative reflexivity and personal responsibility in the taking up and developing of parenting skills.

Spock and Needham (2005), Sears and Sears (2003) and the number of talk board categories on *Mumsnet* all demonstrated the vast array of expectations and demands that were placed on parents at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first, and the huge amount of work involved in carrying this out. Moreover, in the above examples, there was no clear or specific resolution offered as to how best to carry out and manage this alongside any paid work they might be engaged. This, in itself, intensified parental anxieties about the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting.

The idea that parenting was a lot of hard work was recognised, too, by Gina Ford though her advice *did* seek to resolve the dilemma of work in the context of parenting through strict routines and careful time management as discussed in the previous chapter. Ford offered parents an hour-by-hour, week-by-week guide on what exactly they should be doing and argued that she had developed this approach so as to put an end to what she thought was the over indulgence and baby-centredness of other approaches which made it difficult for parents to function in the context of their other responsibilities:

...most of the books will inform you that it is normal for a baby to wake up several times a night, and that you should feed on demand as often and for as long as your baby wants, and allow your baby to find its own sleep pattern. For the authors of these books this approach does not necessarily present a problem, as their work can probably be done at any time of the day to fit in with the baby sleeping. But what about the parents who have to get up at 7am to deal with older children or start a day's work at 9am? After a few weeks, these continual wakings can reduce even the sanest of human beings to complete wrecks. You will be told that things will get better, yet recent surveys show that 85 per cent of children are still waking up at night by the age of one year. The baby experts have no answer; many of them experience the same sleepless nights' syndrome themselves, but they probably do not



suffer as much as other parents who are dictated to by a strict schedule and heavy workloads. (Ford, 2002: xi)

While Ford's advice was contested and controversial, as I discussed in chapter five, her approach and the routines she promoted appeared, ironically, like a lot of hard work.

The huge amount of work involved in parenting was also emphasised on *Supernanny* through the attention it gave to the development of parenting skills. For example, in the TV show – which always began with scenes of chaos, tantrums, children out of control and parents at their wits end – Frost would introduce selected techniques that she felt the parents she was working with needed to deploy so as to resolve their family problems. These techniques, when demonstrated by Frost, would generate a sense of calm and order to the household, suggesting that the problems the family was experiencing was a problem of a lack of parenting skills. Frost would then leave the family and monitor the parents remotely through hidden cameras in their house. The parents would always struggle with the work of executing the techniques, and the chaos and disorder Frost sought to tackle would soon return. Frost would then return for a second round of training to ensure the parents *properly* applied her techniques and that they understood the rationale behind them and the work that was required to make them effective. The show would then close with images of a happy (or happier) family coupled with reflections from the parents about the positive difference Frost's training had made to their lives. In episode one of series two father Jason said, for example: 'I've always said you can't teach parents how to be parents. I think this proves you can teach parents how to be parents' (*Supernanny*, 2005b). And in episode four of the same series, the mother, Sandra, concluded that 'not everything is 100 per cent. You know we still have a few hurdles to cross. But we'll carry on and we'll try the best we can to make this work...we have to make this work because I'm not going back to that old life before' (*Supernanny*, 2005c).

The TV show, and concluding statements from participating parents, therefore promoted the idea that any problems parents were experiencing with their children were often problems of a

lack of parenting skills, and that these skills could be developed, albeit through a lot of hard work. It has been argued that *Supernanny* and other forms of makeover television focus on techniques that encourage reflexivity and transformational work which are similar to those advocated in Third Way welfare discourses (Ouellette and Hay, 2008b: 4). Indeed, Ouellette and Hay (2008b) suggested that reality TV shows, including *Supernanny*, took up and popularised ideas of personal responsibility and self-empowerment. Yet reality TV shows such as *Supernanny*, also worked to shape, in part, these policy discourses. It was therefore possible to see dialogic interaction between popular culture and policy ideas about the importance of developing particular parenting skills, the work needed to develop these, and the personal responsibility parents had for doing this. Yet the focus on parenting skills, and the work and personal responsibility for developing these, was critiqued for what was overlooked and silenced. Gillies suggested, for example, that it moved attention away from the socio-economic and material contexts of parents' lives; but that it also silenced a range of difficulties in taking up such ideas including, for example, a lack of time to do this because of parents' involvement in paid work (Gillies, 2005; 2007).

Policy and popular cultural discourses during the New Labour years emphasised different ideas of work in the context of parenting. In policy, work was understood as parental involvement in paid employment, yet work was also understood as the work of parenting itself – an idea which was emphasised, in particular, through the parenting skills agenda. Popular culture of the period acknowledged parental participation in paid employment, but placed much more emphasis on the idea of work as something incorporating the multitude of aspects, responsibilities and skills required for parenting. The view of parenting as work was, however, criticised by MacLeod:

Throughout the policy and advice literature, and now in the public discourse, parenting is described constantly as a 'job', 'work', 'an occupation' marked by 'skills' and 'competence', 'parents are their children's first educators'...It is a bleakly utilitarian account of something that people feel is the most important part of their lives...For people do not 'parent', they



are parents – emotionally deeply connected to the way they father or mother. This is not some activity or hobby like gardening or train spotting. It is an identity. (MacLeod, 2004: 7)

This quotation points to the depth of feeling and emotion parents experience and draws attention to what is involved in *being a parent* rather than just the tasks involved in *doing parenting*. In locating a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years, it is important therefore to also consider how parents made sense of and managed the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting – and the tremendous amount of deliberative, management work they had to engage in to do this.

#### **Hardworking, responsible parents: how mothers and fathers managed different ideas of work in the context of parenting**

The tensions surrounding the ideological dilemma about differing ideas of work were evident in the accounts of the parents I interviewed. For fathers, the tensions could be seen in the extract from Ross, discussed at the end of chapter four, in which he talked about the struggles he had in trying to achieve a ‘work-life balance’ in the context of long working hours alongside the ‘duty of care’ he felt in relation to looking after his daughter. Most of the fathers I interviewed articulated varying degrees of uncertainty about how to make sense of and manage competing expectations about work in the context of parenting. Nevertheless, while they felt pressures to be more involved in the care of their children, their identity continued to be one that was most firmly rooted in the idea of them being the financial provider (see also O’Brien, 2005; Dermott, 2008). As one mother I interviewed explained in relation to her partner:

He’s a very hands-on Dad, as much as he can be... he’s got to go to work, which he’d rather not do, so obviously he’s not around during the day really, but he is great at just...It’s the main thing of not feeling like you’re on your own, like especially when there are so many

decisions to make...knowing that you are doing that together, so talking about it in the evening, and then maybe kind of sharing the surprises that I've come up with that day, the way Samuel [their son] has reacted to whatever, and talking about what shall we do next time...having those discussions in advance so we're prepared...I suppose it feels like team work and we would definitely be picking each other up I think if it started to not feel like team work, so it's just finding ways of doing that when time's restricted for him, because he's got to go to work. (Jessica)

This extract demonstrated tensions about gender neutrality and gender specificity about parenting that I discussed in chapter four. Jessica and her partner sought to share the work of parenting, but were constrained in doing this because of Jessica's partner's involvement in paid work. She suggested that they managed this, however, by making time to talk with each other as parents and making decisions together. This extract also pointed to the presence of the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting, and the gendered tensions and dynamics contained in it. For while the dilemma was felt by many of the fathers I interviewed, it was rarely resolved by them through a reduction in their paid working hours. While they emphasised their desires and attempts to be involved in the care of their children, none of the fathers I interviewed had cut down on their hours in paid work. Many spoke, instead, of the necessity of their breadwinner role. Indeed, the dilemma did not appear to be experienced and agonised over by fathers in as fraught or conflicted a way as it did for many of the mothers I interviewed. Given these deeply gendered dynamics, the rest of this section focuses on the ways in which the mothers I spoke with made sense of and managed this dilemma.

Six out of the fifteen mothers I interviewed had gone back to paid work following a period of maternity leave<sup>6</sup>, though a further two had taken up voluntary work, and another of the mothers

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<sup>6</sup> This proportion was lower than the national average in which, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, 57 per cent of mothers with children under five were in some kind of paid employment (ONS, Labour Force Survey, 2008). A number of factors could have explained this: that in recruiting parents I made particular use, for



who had identified herself as a stay at home mother said she also engaged in 'very part time work' (see appendix two). Various reasons for the decision to go back to paid employment were offered:

It's quite primarily financial. But equally I think, um, I just think I'm the sort of person who's a better mum if all the time with [Lily] is a complete gift rather than getting, I don't know, it's very difficult to know isn't it? I always assumed I wouldn't be that happy if I didn't work, you know... (Alison)

We can't afford, really, to be, for me not to work. But also, because I genuinely enjoy my job and, umm, you know, it's a different dimension to life, isn't it, to work and to, I mean I never really got to the stage where I thought all I talk about is nappies and, well I suppose a bit, which I mean never really bothered me. I never really thought, ooh I've got no purpose ummm. So, ummm, what motivated me, umm, I guess my genuine enjoyment of the job umm...if I'm honest, going back to work felt like a break... it felt like, if you want, you can make a cup of tea *and* drink it as well, you know, sit down for lunch *and* eat lunch. You know, delightful! (Fiona)

I've always enjoyed my job. Um, and she's going to be with my partner one day and with his parents the other day... she's going to be with family so I think it'll be difficult for me more than it is for anyone else, and she's going to be perfectly fine [laughs]. And, um, in some respects, everyone says it does you good to have a day or two away. You know, for you and for your little one as well... (Sandra)

Different repertoires were drawn upon by these mothers to explain their decision to go back to paid work. These decisions were articulated as being ones that were financially motivated, but a number

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example, of child care settings in which parents usually stayed with their child rather than work places. Working parents, particularly full time working mothers, were also often very pressed for time and so perhaps less likely to want to take part in the research. Added to this, the statistic claiming that 57 per cent of mothers with children under age five were in paid work referred to mothers where their youngest child was under five yet the mothers I spoke with were first time mothers and their child was under the age of three which could have made them more likely to be at home than mothers with more children whose youngest child was approaching five.

of other factors were also offered ranging from enjoyment of the job, a desire to have more than just mothering as an identity in their lives, a rest from the work of parenting, and perceived benefits of maternal employment for the mother and child. Alison spoke, for example, of an assumption that she 'wouldn't be happy' if she did not work and her extract suggested the presence of a discourse that being at home all the time could be tedious and a little boring – a discourse she drew on somewhat ambivalently. In a similar vein, Fiona also offered enjoyment of her job and the importance of having another dimension to her life as key reasons for her returning to paid work. Sandra, too, suggested the circulation and dominance of this idea through the conversational device of 'everyone says' about the idea of the restorative power of a little time spent away from your child which, for her, was going to be through paid employment.

These accounts demonstrate the presence, power and influence of the 'modern' gender neutral ideal about parenting, discussed in chapter four, in which both mothers and fathers were both seen as being, and *wanting* to be, involved in paid work for reasons that included personal space, satisfaction, fulfilment and happiness. Different ideas about what constituted work in the context of parenting could also be seen from these extracts. For example, when Alison claimed she would not be happy if she did not work, she meant she would not be happy if she did not participate in paid work, thus equating work with paid employment. In contrast to this, Fiona explicitly stated that one of the reasons for her wanting to be involved in paid work was the break it gave her from the work of parenting.

How the mothers I interviewed felt about trying to combine these different types of work varied but all who went back to their paid employment suggested some unease. This could be seen in the above extract from my interview with Sandra through the laughter that followed the statement that her daughter would be fine when she went back to work, as well as in her preceding comment that going back would be most difficult *for her*. By evoking the difficulties she would experience, not her daughter, she articulated anxiety in a way that focused on and sought to project



it onto herself and her own feelings rather than the feelings of her child. This drew upon the repertoire about what was best for the child that I located and explored in the previous chapter.

However, the sense of maternal feelings of unease and ambivalence about returning to paid work was articulated very forcefully by Alison when she spoke of the anguish she felt on going back:

It [going back to paid work] was, it was terrible... I did feel ready to go back on some level...just the sheer monotony of all the jobs...having to sterilise bottles, you know, relentlessly, and just the sheer mind numbingness of the sort of constant, relentless, little jobs was driving me mad...but I don't think I'd thought through what it would be like to leave her, at all. Um, and I think what I did wrong, 'cause I just had no idea of what it would be like, going back, I asked to do three full days in the office and two half days from home, which the company said yes to and...I think when it came down to it, I just didn't really have any quality time with her at all and I suppose I thought it would feel like a lot more than it did. So, um, yeah, I was just destroyed to be honest. Very stressed and was just, just felt, I just felt diabolical really...She was really happy. She went to nursery...and she was very, you know, loved it, which made life easier. But I just didn't feel like a mum. I just really felt that I'd stopped being her mum. Genuinely, I just felt that she had a whole mixture of mums...I just felt absolutely desperate. I think it was just because it felt so, so wrong...I just knew that it had affected our relationship um, and she didn't seem to... need me more than anyone else and she got very attached to the girl at nursery... I think a little part of me was downright pure jealous, actually quite a lot. But also on a more fundamental level, I just thought it's not right, she should be close to her mum, you know... (Alison)

The anxieties made visible in this extract linked to the gendered tensions inherent in attempts at trying to resolve the ideological dilemma about work. These feelings stemmed from and reinforced discourses of the importance of participation in paid work as well as discourses of intensive mothering emphasising maternal presence and commitment.

These feelings and the range of repertoires drawn on to convey them, linked with competing ideas of gender neutrality and gender specificity, reinforced the ideological dilemma about different ideas of work in the context of parenting. However, like Sandra, Alison worked to manage her feelings about this dilemma by claiming that it was she who felt anxiety, not her child – making use, again, of the repertoire of what was best for the child. This positioning, in which any anxiety that the child might encounter through being away from its mother was refuted, was particularly common in my reading and analysis of the interview transcripts, as well as my discussions as a parent with other parents about decisions about child care. For example, I have felt quite anxious about putting my own child in nursery yet I am often met with other parents' attempts to reassure me saying: 'he'll love it, it's only you who it will be difficult for'. While this idea could be challenged – for example, through findings from brain research and child development studies that I discussed in chapter two – it nevertheless constituted a powerful and frequent repertoire and discursive device for managing maternal anxiety about child care to enable the return to paid work.

Feelings of anxiety and unease could also be seen amongst mothers who did *not* feel torn about leaving their children whilst they participated in paid work:

I felt terrible that day, not because I was missing them, but because I wasn't... I think the nursery was great... and they had also been very good at preparing you for it. We'd been on a visit, the boys had had I think it was about three, if not four visits of varying lengths leading up to Christmas, which they had clearly enjoyed. There'd not been any real problems, they'd eaten there, and they'd slept there, which were the two things that I kind of was nervous that they might not do in a different place, and appeared to be really happy...so actually I dropped them off... I knew they were happy, I went to work, and I really totally threw myself into work, and people kept saying to me 'how are you feeling'. I'd be like 'about what?' 'About leaving them', 'Oh, fine, they're fine'. It sounds terrible now, but at the time I think



oh my goodness, I'm obviously meant to be kind of going round going boohoo boohoo.

(Debbie)

This girl, she used to work with me, she had a baby and she came back to work and she was always in tears 'cause she wasn't with her daughter and I thought I don't feel like that, does that make me bad 'cause I don't feel sad because I'm not with her?...And I speak to people who say 'I'd rather be with my child' and I think well am I a bad mum for wanting to go to work and have my own independence?...I never got upset when she went to nursery, I've never cried when she went to nursery and I watch people cry when their children leave them and I think I didn't cry. Is there something wrong with me 'cause I didn't cry? (Tina)

These extracts emphasise the presence and power of an ideology of intensive mothering that worked to encourage mothers to be completely absorbed and wrapped up in the needs and well-being of their child, and which left these mothers being made to feel somewhat anxious because they did not feel guilty about leaving their children.

Another set of anxieties mothers also articulated related to the quality of their participation in paid work, not least because of changes they had made to their working patterns since becoming mothers. For example, as Fiona suggested:

I found going part time a much more difficult transition than I expected...I was going back to the same role, so it was a case of managing my role in a sense that I was still doing something meaningful, and helpful, and useful but, slightly less of it. And that's really tricky, you know, I had to leave work at a certain time. In the old days, I could, I'd take work home or you could, you know, catch up at the weekend, and that now I wanted to stop...and then, you know, all that informal networking that you do in work, like going for a coffee with someone, which is really important, certainly for my role, suddenly I felt quite anxious about that, because, you know, if I was going for a coffee with someone, then, you

know...proportionately, it's a big thing, so I felt I had less disposable time, you know, all those bits around the edges of what you are doing... (Fiona)

For Fiona, time, and its effective management, was something she focused on in attempting to manage and make sense of the ideological dilemma. Yet time, and its effective management, was something Fiona and other mothers I interviewed struggled with. One reason for this was because, as suggested by Fiona, she no longer *wanted* to take work home or work at weekends, presumably because she wanted to use this time outside of her paid work hours to focus on being a mother and the intensive activities and work associated with this role.

Attempts at managing time were also evident in Alison's repertoires. After a 'terrible' return to paid work in which she felt anxious about the lack of time she spent with her daughter, she negotiated a more part time position of three days. Whilst this enabled her to have more time with her daughter and feel less anxious about that, she spoke of the negative impact this had on her paid work:

I don't feel professional or that I'm doing my job properly...I used to have a real hunger to go and do the job perfectly and I think it's quite hard to get that in three days a week. Um, but I don't admit that very freely 'cause I don't want to give, you know, working mums a bad name...I've lost at the moment, that, just, ambitious hunger thing that I used to have... It's just a different focus at the moment...I don't think, I don't know any of my friends who've managed to find a good compromise. We all sort of settle for a shabby compromise. (Alison)

The sense of the difficulties in combining paid work with motherhood and of managing to excel at both, were fuelled by demanding sets of expectations and assumptions about commitment in relation to paid work during the New Labour years (see Gambles et al, 2006) as well as expectations about parenting, felt in particularly gendered ways, in the context of an ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). In reflecting on Alison's description of things as a 'shabby compromise', I



was struck by how far removed it seemed to be from the idea of 'hard-working, responsible parents'. Yet, at the same time, I was also struck by how deeply entangled these two ideas were because of the work that had to be put in to manage a dilemma and set of tensions that were very difficult to resolve.

One resolution that was implicitly promoted and encouraged in the popular cultural texts I explored was a decision not to return to paid work and to focus, instead, on the work of parenting.

As one mother who made this decision said:

It's an awful thing to say...but in modern life...the mother tends to do most of the childcare, often have her own career, often do most of the stuff around the house, the organisational stuff...women tend to think they can do it all, whereas I've accepted that you can do it all, but something has to give and you don't do it all as well. So I'm a stay at home mum and I can concentrate on that and I love it. And Jack is spoilt rotten. We do so many activities, and swimming and music and stuff every week whereas mothers that are trying to juggle career and kid or kids, they do it less well...And they're stressed and they're knackered. Some of them do it for financial reasons and others do it for their identity and they feel they don't want to give up working or they're just a mum which I think is really sad. I think being a mum, for me, is more important for me than my career and raking in lots of money. Really, truly, you can't put a price on it...'cause I know it's going to affect Jack and how confident he is at school and how happy he is and I don't care if they're going to pay me a hundred grand a year now. I wouldn't go back, until he's at school...I didn't think I'd feel like this until I had him. I was going to go back. I was going to get some nanny or au pair and I was going to go back, straight to work. Oh, it would break my heart to go back now. I can't even imagine going back now, leaving him with someone else to do the childcare. (Sylvia)

Here Sylvia acknowledged the idea of gender neutrality but also rejected it through her decision to stay at home with her son and focus her energies on the work of parenting. In doing this she aligned

herself with an ideal of gender specificity, discussed in chapter four, identifying the work of parenting as being deeply important for her son. She appeared to take on, wholeheartedly, the ideology of intensive mothering which called for mothers to focus all their energies on their children and the work of parenting.

In making sense of and managing this decision, Sylvia worked hard to emphasise her lack of anxiety about her decision by stressing the fun she had with her son and how much more she was able to give him because she was not stressed out like a lot of mothers who were in paid work. Sylvia articulated her surprise at her decision to be a stay at home mother, but through her rhetorical choices, she positioned this decision as the morally right and responsible thing to do because of the positive impact it would have on her son's well-being and development. In doing this she appeared to position her decision to be a stay at home mother as an emergent ideal made consciously against what she perceived as a dominant ideal of mothers being in paid employment.

Another mother, Amy, who was also planning to return to paid work, realised soon after the birth of her son that she did not want to do this and, like Sylvia, justified her decision by stressing how much more time and energy this gave her to focus on her son and the work of parenting:

I would have said I would have gone back to work and I think everyone expected me to go back to work and really within a few weeks of Freddie arriving, I was just like 'I can't do it, I can't put him in a nursery and go back'. I mean there's no way... I put all the money [maternity pay] into a high interest savings account and didn't touch any of it and I just thought well I'm going to have to pay most of it back if I don't go back to work so best it's just there and I just pretend it doesn't even exist and then I can make the decision without even having to think, oh can we afford for me not to go back... It was just too much fun really. I just hadn't anticipated, you know, how strong a bond it would be and how much fun it would be because I think, I still have quite a lot of friends who are childless and, um, I think quite a lot of people have said to me oh you'll be bored...you'll be back within three months



or whatever 'cause you'll be bored and you'll of had enough...But I think in the event, I just felt as if there was actually plenty to occupy my mind and I don't think that I've ever felt bored during the two years. I think that they change so quickly and it changes your outlook on life and you know, I just had other things to do with my time. (Amy)

Like Sylvia, Amy articulated her surprise rejection of 'modern' gender neutral ideals because of the depth of feelings about and connection she experienced with her son as well as the amount of fun they had together. This surprise could link to the sense that staying at home was a residual idea but also an emergent ideal that they had actively and positively chosen. In explaining her decision to stay at home, Amy emphasised how she did not encounter boredom – a repertoire that was perhaps associated with a residual idea of staying at home, and one that was deployed by some of the mothers I interviewed to explain, in part, their motivation to return to paid work. Indeed, Amy, like Sylvia, emphasised the fun and enjoyment of being with her child.

Another more serious rationale for mothers staying at home was the idea of them having the sole or main responsibility for teaching and training their child which could be seen in the following extract from my interview with Jessica:

We felt that our child, we really wanted to give him the start that involved us as much as possible, and just for us to have the influence in his first few years, when it's just massive changes, and the impact that it has on his kind of later life and things, so if we could do that then we definitely wanted to, and I haven't regretted that, and it's been great actually, and I'd certainly do it again, but just I think just the little things, even now just noticing . . . well he's 16 months and the whole discipline thing is kind of kicking off, like properly, not that he's any trouble but you've got to be absolutely aware of what you're doing, and make proper...like just be quite thoughtful in the way that you're kind of training them, and teaching them, and I just think it would be a shame if it wasn't us that was doing that.

(Jessica)

The extracts from the interviews with Sylvia and Jessica reveal a range of motivations for staying at home: the fun it was, the ways in which it would impact positively on their child's well-being and development, and a desire to teach and train their child.

These motivations contrasted somewhat with the repertoires deployed by some of the non-British mothers I interviewed. For example, a Polish mother I spoke with felt constrained when she spoke of her husband's reticence in relation to her taking up paid work:

Albin don't, doesn't want me to go back to work, he say you have to stay and look after him, I'll tell you when he start talk, and when he start talking you can send him to nursery or crèche and he will tell you what's happened to him, because this world is crazy now you don't know who is out there. They say they are childminders but you know they might be paedophiles. You don't know who they are. And I said we need the money, that's why I need to go to work...we have all the debts to pay. (Jolanta)

For Jolanta, being a stay at home mother was linked to her husband's desire for her to look after their child because of his distrust of alternative child care. While the repertoires Jolanta made use of drew on ideas of what was best for the child, at least in relation to what her husband perceived to be best, the idea of Jolanta staying at home was not articulated as a positively made choice of hers but rather one that was full of constraint and frustration because of their financial difficulties and her desire to earn money to alleviate this.

Repertoires of constraint were also articulated by Mahad in relation to his wife Rafia staying at home to look after their daughter. He said:

She's [Rafia] very keen on getting a job and doing some work. Any work at all. She's desperate for work. I would never stop her...we have tried childminders and it wasn't really a good experience...I could see that she's [their daughter] not eating anything, not really



happy...normally [in Pakistan] grandparents take care of the children, so childminding is never a problem. That's something we miss, especially Rafia. (Mahad)

For Mahad, the constraints were ones of not having appropriate child care options but for Rafia, whilst this was mentioned, the constraints she spoke of focused more on not being able to find suitable employment. Given this, and the importance she placed on doing something other than just caring for her own daughter, she began volunteering at her local Sure Start centre cooking Asian food one morning a week and participating in Sure Start run training courses:

I'm doing a few courses here. I've just finished doing my Teaching Assistant course, and now I'm going to do childcare...I love to work with children, it's nice, it's fun, singing, playing and enjoying all time, so I want to keep myself busy with a lot of people...I was not interested to do cooking, but to make myself busy because there was no other option to go outside and to do anything. I applied for many jobs here, but I didn't receive any, because I don't have any education here, and no experience, no communication skills, and I never receive any response, so now I'm thinking that to do cooking is good for me to improve my communication skills and keep myself busy. (Rafia)

These repertoires of constraint from non-British parents were very different to the repertoires of choice used by some of the middle class British parents I interviewed. For example, in their rationales for staying at home with their child, Sylvia, Amy and Jessica made use of rhetorical resources of having fun and of child well-being and development and worked to emphasise how being a stay at home mother was, for them, a positive, empowered choice – a positioning that I suggested earlier was emergent in the structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years, and a positioning that was, perhaps, more common amongst a more dominant and powerful social group, in this case the middle class, white British.

Nevertheless, despite it being a positioning associated with a more culturally powerful social group, it was still an emergent positioning and one that remained somewhat counter cultural in a context in which an involvement in paid work was emphasised. Indeed, the accounts from Sylvia, Amy and Jessica all articulated a view that while stay at home mothers were engaged in important work, their decision to resolve the ideological dilemma about work by focusing exclusively on the work of parenting was perceived as going somewhat against the grain of what was generally expected within policy discourse. As Amy said:

I know that the Government, and I agree with them, I think if people want to go back to work, the provision has to be there because it's not fair to penalise people for this but at the same time you have to be really wary of pushing it too far in the opposite direction and almost obliging people to go back. It's like, you've got to get these qualified young mothers back in the workforce and I think for who, for what? It's not to do with us because we're happy to cut back and be able to do this. It's to do with them wanting to stimulate the economy. Well I'm sorry, but that's not our concern. So you know, as I say, the provision has to be there and there has to be no stigma for people if they really want to do that, but at the same time, those of us who want to do it and can afford to do it must just be left. (Amy)

Amy demonstrated her awareness of and even partial agreement with government discourses that emphasised maternal participation in paid work. Yet, through her position of *affluence*, she felt she should be left alone to resolve the ideological dilemma by staying at home. Amy's account therefore suggested a classed dimension of this resolution – which as seen above intersected too with dynamics of ethnicity – in that she articulated a view that mothers who could afford to stay at home should be left to do this, whereas the government was right to encourage mothers into paid work if they would otherwise be claiming welfare benefits.

So what of the mothers I interviewed who could not afford to stay at home without claiming benefits – the ones, to use Barlow et al's (2002) phrase, who could not 'square the circle' of fully



providing the care and education of their child alongside participation in paid work – because of the absence of a partner? One lone mother I interviewed, Tina, felt that it was right to encourage people, including lone mothers, to participate in paid work:

The Government think more of you if you're willing to go to work and you get more help...and why should you get help if you sit at home all day? I don't, I just don't think that's fair. People go out to work. It's hard enough to live in this world as it is and people who sit at home all day expect to get money for nothing, basically...a lot of people I've met say I don't want to work, I'd rather sit at home all day. That would drive me mad, I'd be bored. You'd never have any money to do anything, you couldn't spend any, you couldn't take the child anywhere 'cause you've got no money to do it 'cause everything costs...being at home all day would drive me mad. (Tina)

Tina's emphasis on the importance of participation in paid work and the responsibilities people should take in relation to this demonstrated her take up of government discourses. In her alignment of these ideas she drew on repertoires of laziness and boredom to describe being at home all day and, in the process, resolved, for herself, the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting by dismissing the idea of parenting as work. Her view that being at home all day would be boring sat in contrast to some of the views of stay at home mothers discussed earlier, though it aligned with repertoires of some of the other mothers who had gone back to paid work. While the articulation of the idea that being at home all day was boring was contested amongst the mothers I interviewed, it also appeared as an idea that was linked, in part, to socio-economic positioning and the availability of money to fill time with the types of baby and parenting activities that were discussed by Sylvia and Amy.

Indeed, another lone mother I interviewed called Natasha, who did not feel able to participate in paid work, spoke of the intense boredom she felt through her sole engagement in the work of parenting:

Don't get me wrong, I'd love to go back to work, I would love it, but my manager won't change my hours and there's no way I can get a babysitter 'til ten o'clock at night...I don't have child care and my manager's so stuck up, he won't change my hours, so... if I could get a child minder that's gonna work from say 3 o'clock 'til 10 o'clock then yeah, I'd go back to work tomorrow... for me to have my own stable thing, you know. Not to be so bored all the time 'cause to be honest, I get bored a hell of a lot. I mean she plays with her toys and I just sit here. Even when she's in bed, I'm still sat watching c-beebies, you know. I do, I get very bored. And they say to me go up the sure start centre, but that's only once every week.

(Natasha)

Yet, when pushed a little further on whether she could have challenged her manager, found suitable child care or another job, she said:

It's too much hassle. I'm not gonna have enough time to bond with her, I'd rather leave it a little bit longer until she's a bit bigger and then put her into a nursery and then go to school, within that hours...you don't want to miss first words, first walk, everything. You know, I don't want that. I'd rather wait until she's a bit older and then go back to work in the time that she is in the school or something...I don't really want to miss it, my first child, you know, I don't wanna miss nothing...I don't like being at home. I get bored of sitting in this house 24 / 7. I'd like to go out and do something. That's why I would like to go back to work so then I'm not bored, I've always got something...But I don't wanna miss my daughter's first steps.

It is hard, yeah...but I wanna be the one that teaches her everything, you know. (Natasha)

Through these extracts it was possible to see Natasha acknowledging the presence of different ideas of work and her dilemmas and ambivalence about them. Moreover, through the range of repertoires she drew on to account for her situation – including her desire to be with and teach her daughter – it was possible to see the presence of repertoires emphasising what she perceived as being best for her child, as well as the tremendous amount of work she engaged in to make sense of and justify her



own particular situation. However, the degree of work she put in may also have been linked to the classed dynamic of the interview encounter in which she, as a young lone mother, felt she had to justify not going to work to me, as an older middle class woman, as well as to the broader research audience.

This chapter has explored the ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting: how it was present in policy and popular culture as well as the accounts of parents I interviewed. Policy discourses during the New Labour years emphasised differing ideas of work – parental participation in paid employment, but also the work of parenting itself; whereas popular culture of the period perpetuated tensions between these ideas by emphasising the importance of the work of parenting in a context where many parents felt pressures to be in paid employment. This ideological dilemma, and the structure of feeling it pointed to, was gendered in orientation. This was because while fathers were being encouraged to take on increasingly active roles in the care of their children, mothers were still expected to prioritise the care of their children even as they were increasingly assumed to be in paid employment. These gendered tensions also had a classed dynamic. Policy concerns about a perceived lack of parenting skills amongst some working class mothers saw an emphasis on attempts to promote these. Yet working class mothers, particularly those that were lone mothers, were more likely to be on welfare benefits so they also faced greater pressures to be in paid employment. Consideration of somewhat different repertoires from non-British parents I interviewed further suggested dynamics relating to ethnicity and nationality and their intersections with dynamics of gender and class. These findings make clear how a structure of feeling approach can highlight different ways in which policy is present, powerful and positioned in parents' lives – issues I reflect further on in the concluding chapter.

In exploring the ideological dilemma about work, this chapter also revealed the tremendous amount of deliberative work parents had to engage in to manage and make sense of this dilemma.

Attention to this deliberative work, performed by parents in relation to all three of the dilemmas I have explored, points to a further understanding of work that was a central part of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years which links up with the idea of a therapeutic culture of the self. The deliberative work that parents engaged in, seen through chapters four, five and six, suggests ways in which a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years relied upon and promoted a particular image of hard-working, responsible parents: parents who were personally willing and personally able to manage and make sense of the dilemmas they encountered about parenting.



## **7. A structure of feeling about parenting and the significance of the structure of feeling approach**

This research, which began with an interest in the relationship between social policy and personal lives, utilised and developed Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach in forming and addressing the following questions:

- What does a study of policy, popular culture and personal accounts suggest about a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years?
- And how might the structure of feeling approach enrich understandings about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives?

In this concluding chapter, I reiterate the ways in which I extended the structure of feeling approach and further explore what this approach has suggested in relation to my two research questions. I end by briefly considering the changing policy context of the current Coalition Government, how a structure of feeling about parenting might be affected by this, and how the structure of feeling approach, as I have developed it, offers a revealing framework for understanding and exploring this changing context.

### **Extending the structure of feeling approach**

Raymond Williams introduced his structure of feeling approach as a way of exploring various movements and tendencies that interacted to produce a mood associated with a particular period. In this approach, he placed emphasis on the analysis of a variety of cultural texts which, he argued, contained different forces and attempts to make sense of these that characterised the mood of the time in question. Like Williams, I made use of a variety of cultural texts including selected policy documents and popular cultural sources of the period. But I also made use of interviews with

parents as I considered these to be particularly critical in locating and understanding a structure of feeling about parenting in the period under investigation. The inclusion of interviews was informed by two factors. The first of these was my desire to explore how parents themselves were agents in the making and shaping of a structure of feeling about parenting: to consider whether parents accepted, rejected, pushed or went beyond ideas that were part of it; and how their particular responses pointed to the structure of feeling of the time. My interest in including interviews was influenced by my exposure to the concepts of ideological dilemmas and interpretative repertoires and the ways in which these were revealed through the interviews. Whilst the popular cultural texts I explored, particularly *Mumsnet* but also *Supernanny*, enabled me to explore some of the repertoires in circulation, the interviews enabled me to explore and probe them more fully. The second factor informing my decision to include interviews was one relating to the period of study, the New Labour years, which, it has been suggested, was an era that gave rise to and placed emphasis on the personal and personal strategies for working through issues and dilemmas that people encountered (see Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999; Gill, 2007). This emphasis was linked, in part, to feminist conceptions of the personal being political, as well as other movements and tendencies including neo-liberal, communitarian and Third Way thinking which emphasised personal responsibilities in relation to welfare approaches (see Gorton, 2007; Giddens, 1998).

My research also developed the structure of feeling approach through an interrogation and extension of the notion of feeling. Williams used the word to refer to a public mood, but given the depth and intensity of personal feelings involved in experiences of becoming a parent, I wanted to explore feelings at a more personal and emotional level and consider how these interacted with the public mood. This interest, which emerged through my own personal experiences and engagements with the topic, was incorporated by focusing attention on the repertoires parents made use of and what these suggested in relation to their personal feelings and anxieties, and the ideological dilemmas and wider structure of feeling they were part of. The structure of feeling approach that I developed therefore worked with the notion of feeling as *both* a public mood and a set of personal



feelings and emotions. By using personal accounts and paying attention to the repertoires within these, I was therefore able to extend the structure of feeling approach in ways that made it more appropriate for exploring a study of relationships between policy and personal lives in the context of parenting and becoming a parent.

### **The structure of feeling and significance of the approach**

So what, then, has my research suggested in relation to my research questions? In chapter two, I identified the importance New Labour placed on parenting and the ways in which this interacted with wider public discourses of the time. In chapter four, I explored contestations about the gendered nature of parenting. These could be seen in policy and popular cultural texts of the period though policy tended to place more emphasis on gender neutrality whilst popular culture appeared to emphasise gender specificity. In the accounts of the parents I interviewed, much contestation could also be seen, which interacted with policy and popular culture, to produce much personal anxiety. This gendered anxiety was a pivotal aspect of the structure of feeling about parenting which policy, popular culture and parents had to address and manage.

One of the ways of managing the contestation and uncertainty about parenting was to draw on discourses of what was best for the child. Yet what was best for the child was, in itself, contested as seen through the ideological dilemma about expertise that was explored in chapter five. On the one hand, emphasis was placed on research evidence and other forms of external expertise. Yet ideas of parental intuition and personal expertise were also celebrated. This tension pointed to a wider dilemma inherent in the structure of feeling during the New Labour years in which emphasis was given to external expertise in relation to parenting because of the importance placed on parenting and the need for parents to get their parenting 'right'; yet emphasis was also placed on parental intuition and personal expertise because of a culture of personal responsibility. However,

my research suggests that ideas of external and personal expertise were not always positioned by parents as being in tension with each other – rather that the latter was often developed out of engagement with the former. This engagement sometimes took the form of alignment and at other times took the form of dismissal and defiance and through these responses parents were able to speak with degrees of confidence about their own parenting, though the sense of anxiety and uncertainty often encountered was not always overcome.

Chapter six explored a third ideological dilemma about work in the context of parenting. Contestations about what constituted work were recognised, in part, by New Labour through its work-life balance policy agenda. But parents often found it difficult to achieve a work-life balance that they felt comfortable with. In considering the ideological dilemma about work – but also the other ideological dilemmas about gender and about expertise – what became apparent was the tremendous amount of deliberative work parents also had to engage in so as to make sense of and manage the dilemmas of parenting. Indeed, the process of making sense of and managing these dilemmas, and the personal responsibilities placed on parents for this, suggested alternative ways in which parents could be understood as ‘hardworking’ and ‘responsible’.

For all the anxieties and uncertainties, my analysis nevertheless revealed there were particular experiences and ways of being that were seen as more appropriate or typical. For example, while the parents I interviewed articulated uncertainty about the ideological dilemma about the gendered nature of parenting, many placed more emphasis on gender specificity than gender neutrality. This suggests that while ideas of gender neutrality were very much in circulation, particularly in policy discourses, ideas of gender specificity held a more dominant position. This could be seen in the extract from my joint interview with Samantha and Gerry when they spoke of Gerry’s redundancy, their temporary solution of Samantha working full time with Gerry focusing on the work of parenting, and the unease they conveyed about this. Gender specificity could therefore be seen, as well, in relation to the ideological dilemma about work. Whilst the fathers I interviewed



articulated pulls and pressures about the work of parenting, it was common for them to focus their attention on their participation in paid work. It was also typical for mothers to engage in part time paid employment or to leave the labour market completely so as to focus more on the work of parenting.

In relation to the ideological dilemma about expertise, the example of feeding an infant saw breastfeeding being positioned as the dominant and most appropriate approach – an approach that drew extensively on research evidence and external expertise. Yet personal experiences of feeding an infant often sat in tension with these ideas which resulted in anxieties and also demonstrated the presence of bottle feeding as an actively residual force. In the example about parental styles and approaches about the daily management of parenting, the idea of routine appeared to be more dominant which was linked with parental desires to create a sense of control in relation to the chaos and upheaval of becoming a parent.

Whilst gender specificity, breastfeeding and the idea of routine emerged as typical, seemingly appropriate and dominant ideas, these jostled with alternative ideas including those of gender neutrality, bottle feeding and a less structured on-demand approach to feeding and sleeping. These alternative ideas, if taken up, were often justified by parents with reference to what was best for their child. Indeed, a particularly common way in which parents sought to make sense of and manage the presence of competing ideas about parenting in relation to all the dilemmas was to adopt a position of ‘what works’ for them and their child. This could be seen, too, through the following extract from an introduction to an edited collection of *Mumsnet* online discussions:

One of the first things we learned from the site is that different folk really do take different strokes. The aim of this book is simply to provide you with a bank of solutions which thousands of our members have found to the countless thorny dilemmas, problems and panics every parent faces in the first year of their child’s life. We’re confident that, whatever the subject, you’ll find someone’s advice works for you. (Foster et al, 2003: xi)

The idea of 'different strokes' and 'what works *for you*' took up ideas of choice and personal responsibility for parents to work out the ideas and approaches that worked for them and their child. Yet the idea that this choice, and the work involved in different parents making such decisions, should not critique different choices that other parents had made was also apparent in the *Mumsnet* extract. This could also be seen through extracts of some of the mothers cited in chapter five. For example, Amy, Jessica and Debbie made it clear how important breastfeeding was to them, whilst also making sure they emphasised that they knew it could be difficult, that it did not work for everyone, and that alternative feeding options should be recognised and respected. And in relation to parental styles and approaches, Jessica highlighted different options and while she sought to justify the approach she had adopted with reference to what was best for her and her child, she also worked to indicate that other approaches were also valid. Chapter six, which explored the dilemma about work, also revealed this positioning. Amy, for example, said she thought it was right to support mothers to be in paid work but not to the extent that it stigmatised mothers who stayed at home. However, the example of maternal decisions about paid employment contained more judgemental stances about the various decisions, particularly in the views expressed by stay at home mothers.

The positioning of acknowledging difference whilst also promoting particular ways of parenting was similar to New Labour's 'what works' approach to policy in which it was noted that:

Being a parent is – and should be – an intensely personal experience and parents can be effective in very different ways. However, we also have a growing understanding, evidenced from research, about the characteristics of effective parenting. (DfES, 2007: 1)

The acknowledgement of difference alongside appropriate stances and approaches through an 'evidence-based' or 'what works' approach to ideas and advice about parenting offered a way for policy to play up pragmatism so as to side-step and slice through ideological beliefs and dilemmas about parenting. Yet while 'what works' approaches in policy, popular culture and personal accounts



did partly achieve this, the significance of the subject matter and the degree of contestation relating to it meant that a 'what works' pragmatism was unable to completely address or close down the dilemmas. The sense of anxiety that characterised ideas and experiences of parenting during the New Labour years therefore persisted – a sense of anxiety that was also displaced to a personal level through the presence of discourses about choice and responsibility.

So what does the structure of feeling approach suggest about the presence, power and position of policy in parents' lives during the New Labour years? In locating and exploring the three ideological dilemmas, I analysed a range of interpretative repertoires that parents drew on in their attempts at making sense of and managing these. The accounts of parents made visible various ways in which policy was powerfully present in parents' lives as seen, for example, in the ways parents found it necessary to personally deliberate and work through various policy callings. This could be seen in relation to claims that 'breast was best' as well as policies seeking to encourage participation in paid work. Nevertheless, and perhaps because of the emphasis placed on personal responsibility, the parents I interviewed were not completely subjugated by policy: they answered back, and were sometimes unwilling or unable to take up the ideals put forward in policy. The repertoires the parents made use of demonstrated different responses to, and articulations of, the ideological dilemmas taking up various positions of acceptance, extension and / or refusal. But the structure of feeling approach emphasised, too, how policy was only part of the set of governmental mappings and discourses and that popular culture played a significant role too. Policy and popular culture sometimes aligned as, for example, in the case of feeding an infant and the promotion of the idea that breast was best. Yet they could also contradict each other, for example with policy emphasising the idea of work as paid employment and popular culture placing more emphasis on the work of parenting. The presence of these alignments and contradictions meant there were a variety of options and possibilities requiring negotiation. Such complex articulations suggested that the presence, power and position of policy in parents' lives was both messy and deeply variable.

The presence, power and position of policy depended, in part, on parents' gendered and classed positionings. For example, whilst policy often used the gender neutral terms of parent and parenting it was often mothers and mothering that were being addressed and discussed – and, perhaps as a result, it was mothers who tended to express more anxiety about their parenting. The intersections of gendered and classed positionings could also be seen through analysis of policy relating to feeding an infant and participation in paid work. For example, whilst policy emphasised the importance of parental participation in paid work, this was particularly so in relation to lone and other mothers who were seen as being too heavily reliant on welfare benefits and who were subsequently targeted, with varying degrees of success, by 'workfare' callings. Whilst middle class mothers who stayed at home experienced some anxiety relating to this and worked to justify this as 'fun' and a 'modern', positively chosen decision, working class mothers I interviewed drew more on repertoires of duty and obligation, be it to paid work or to being with their child, to justify their decisions in the context of policy discourses. These intersections of gender and class could be seen, too, albeit differently, through the example of feeding an infant, in which middle class mothers I interviewed appeared more committed to the idea of breastfeeding and experienced much anxiety if they encountered difficulties with it. In contrast, working class mothers I spoke with appeared to experience less anxiety about their decisions to bottle feed their babies and articulated, instead, feelings of defensiveness and defiance. Attention to these feelings – be it anxiety, defensiveness or defiance – demonstrates, further, how a consideration of personal feelings can offer more opportunities for teasing out the structure of feeling, and the ability of the approach to reveal different ways in which policy is present and positioned in different parents' personal lives.

My analysis also suggested the significance of positionings relating to ethnicity and nationality, and their intersections with gender and class dynamics. While my sample did not include British parents from different ethnic groups, I did speak to five recent migrants from a variety of different countries. Their accounts were useful in that, because they were recent migrants, the ways in which their accounts revealed differences in relation to their perceptions, experiences and



negotiations of parenting reinforced my analysis of the other interviews about what made up a structure of feeling about parenting during the period. It also alerted me to the ways in which this structure of feeling was a particularly British (and possibly English) one. Further work exploring the accounts of British parents from a range of ethnic groups would be particularly useful for developing an analysis of what made up this structure of feeling, and for considering different ways in which different parents might possess or relate with it.

Yet, as indicated, while parental responses to policy could be linked to gendered and classed positionings, and to dynamics of ethnicity and nationality, they were not irreducible to them; and because of the tensions in governmental discourses about parenting, and the messy and varied responses from parents, the presence, power and position of policy in parents' personal lives was often difficult to unravel. For example, middle class mothers that I spoke to did not all respond in the same way to ideas about what constituted work in the context of parenting. Some emphasised the work of parenting itself, others emphasised paid work. Working class mothers I interviewed also had different responses with some emphasising staying at home to focus on the work of parenting, and others choosing to be active in paid work. Another example of parental responses to policy not being irreducible to gendered or classed positionings related to parental styles and approaches in that parental approaches that were adopted by the parents I interviewed cut across social positionings.

Nevertheless, policy, through its interaction with and co-constitution of other public discourses, was always present in the parents' lives. This could be seen through the work the parents did to align themselves with public policy discourses or the defensiveness and defiance they demonstrated against them. This shows how policy, albeit in varied and sometimes unexpected ways, was not only present but also powerful in the deliberative work that parents had to engage in and it played a constitutive aspect in their own personal lives. The structure of feeling approach that I have utilised and extended through my research therefore offers a particularly rich approach for exploring the interplay of policy, popular culture and personal lives, and the significance of these

interactions for understanding different experiences and social inequalities relating to particular issues in particular periods.

### **The changing political and policy context**

While my research was concerned with ideas and experiences about becoming a parent during the New Labour years, the political context has since changed significantly with the arrival of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. This political shift is having major implications in relation to welfare discourses and approaches that affect parents and relate to parenting. As Churchill has suggested:

...early assessments of the Coalition's programme for reform predict further increases in child, family and working age poverty over the next few years and highlight the disproportionate effects of the spending cuts on groups such as women [and] families with children...In addition, the new era of family policy is set to sustain behavioural moralising discourses whereby 'disadvantage' equates with 'immorality and dysfunction' while also returning us to a more discriminatory discourse towards alternative family forms. (Churchill, 2010: 206)

In an analysis of the welfare reforms proposed and being introduced by the coalition government, and the impacts these will have on family finances, the Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) (2011: 2) have suggested that new families with small babies will be amongst those that are particularly hard hit. This, the FPI argue, will result from the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant, reductions in the value of child tax credits and the abolition of the Child Trust Fund. The three year freeze in child benefit, as well as its removal for higher earners, demonstrates further some of the ways in which parents will lose out financially, and there is a renewed emphasis on a more punitive 'workfare' agenda.



While David Cameron PM has said little directly about parenting, Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats and deputy Prime Minister in the Coalition Government, gave a parenting speech in January 2011 which stated:

In the UK there are now almost two million children growing up in workless households – one of the worst rates in Europe. We have to help their parents into work. Not because every home must have two working parents in it. If mothers or fathers can afford to stay at home, and want to, then that is their choice. But work can help people become better parents. And not simply because of the money. But because it can help you become a better role model. It brings fulfilment. It fosters self-confidence. And it introduces parents to other working parents; people to learn from and talk to. (Clegg, 2011)

This workfare agenda – which omits mothers and fathers who can *afford* to stay at home – speaks to issues of moralising that are likely to perpetuate ideological dilemmas about work in the context of parenting, and its gendered and classed aspects. Clegg highlighted the introduction of the new Universal Credit and the increase of the income tax personal allowance over the course of their parliament, which he claims will remove disincentives to work. Nevertheless, the FPI suggests that reforms to working tax credits, with parents having to be in 24 rather than 16 hours of paid employment to be eligible, will reduce paid work incentives as many parents are likely to find it difficult to find this many hours of paid employment that can be done in ways that fit flexibly around their child care commitments (FPI, 2011: 2).

Whilst there is a renewed emphasis on the workfare agenda, the FPI also argues that this is being undermined further by policies that weaken the financial independence of women such as cuts to child benefits and reductions in the child care element of the working tax credit (FPI, 2011: 4). This, they suggest, is offering unintentional though renewed support for a gender specific male breadwinner and dependent female carer set up. Thus by emphasising participation in paid work but removing some of the tax and benefits that have worked to support this, the ideological dilemma

about work in the context of parenting, and the gendered and classed aspects and effects of this, are not only being perpetuated but also exacerbated.

Despite an agenda of cuts in welfare benefits and services, there have, however, been reassurances about support for a variety of welfare services focusing on supporting parents in the work of parenting. In the same speech about parenting, Clegg (2011) indicated that the 15 hours a week of free nursery provision for all three and four years olds would remain in place and that these would be extended to two years olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. He also claimed that Sure Start centres would be retained and kept accessible for all and that a further 4200 health visitors would be appointed to support parents, often by visiting them in their homes to talk about parenting issues and challenges they were experiencing.

In relation to which parents engaged in the work of parenting, Clegg also indicated proposals for mothers and fathers to share parental leave. He stated that if a mother returned to paid work before the end of her maternity leave, then the father would be able to take the remainder of the time up to a maximum of six months. This policy came into force in April 2011. Alongside this, Clegg announced the Coalition's intention to introduce a universal right to request flexible working and launched a consultation on a 'new properly flexible system of parental leave' that the Coalition government claims it would like to introduce by 2015. This all demonstrates the Coalition's desire to position itself as recognising shifts in gendered dynamics but also to be seen to further promote this.

As Clegg said:

Despite the fact fathers can request flexible working, many feel reluctant to do so. There is still a stigma attached. And, when a child is born, men are still only entitled to a paltry two weeks of paternity leave. These rules patronize women and marginalise men. They're based on a view of life in which mothers stay at home and fathers are the only breadwinners. That's an Edwardian system that has no place in 21st Century Britain. Women suffer. Mothers are expected to take on the vast bulk of childcare themselves. If they don't, they



very often feel judged. If they do, they worry about being penalised at work. So it's no surprise that many working women feel that they can't win. Children suffer, too often missing out on time with their fathers. Time that is desperately important to their development. We know that where fathers are involved in their children's lives they develop better friendships, they learn to empathise, they have higher self-esteem, and they achieve better at school. And men suffer too. More and more fathers want to play a hands-on role with their young children. But too many feel that they can't. That culture must change. Government won't be able to change it alone. But we can do our bit by modernising the opportunities for parents who work. (Clegg, 2011)

As well as indicating the Coalition's desire to enable more gender neutrality in relation to leave arrangements and the sharing of the work of parenting should parents want this, this extract also shows how contested ideas of expertise continue to feature. Clegg states, for example, how women, children and men suffer through more gender specific leave arrangements and ideas of parenting stating, for example, that '*we know*' that fathers involvement in their children's lives has a range of positive outcomes relating to child development. The use of the phrase '*we know*' could be read as evidence of the Coalition drawing on research evidence about the benefits of father involvement in the care of their children, but it could also be read as a more personal claim in which Clegg and others in the Coalition government know, personally, about this. The presence of this possibility therefore works to suggest that the Coalition government understands and has personal knowledge of the challenges of contemporary parenting and that it is 'on parents' side'.

My analysis of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years – and the ideological dilemmas about the gendered nature of parenting, and expertise and work in the context of parenting that were part of it – can therefore be used to explore change and continuity in relation to New Labour and the Coalition years. Moreover, the political and policy changes associated with the Coalition Government could be analysed alongside contemporary popular culture and personal

accounts from people who are becoming parents during this period so as to explore interactions of the personal and political and the ways in which this is shaped and shaping of a changing structure of feeling. The structure of feeling approach could also explore changing ways in which different people possess and relate with the particular structure of feeling about parenting of this period, and what this might suggest about the changing nature of personal experiences and social inequalities connected with parenting.

My analysis of a structure of feeling about parenting during the New Labour years, and the ways in which I have extended Williams' structure of feeling approach, offers a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding, locating and working with cultural complexity; and for exploring different ways in which people are positioned within this culture. For anyone concerned with these issues – and the complexity of social inequalities and their (lack of) transformation – this is a particularly significant approach. And because it is a theory and an approach that makes central the complexities and contradictions of entanglements between the personal and political, it is particularly significant for an age in which so much emphasis is placed on the personal, personal responsibilities and therapeutic strategies.

The structure of feeling approach as I have extended it offers a rich and appropriate way of understanding changing sensibilities about parenting, the ways in which contemporary policy developments have contributed to this, and how these present themselves in different parents' lives. It also offers a way of exploring other pressing social concerns and the ways in which these illustrate, in different ways, interactions of the personal and political. The structure of feeling approach, as I have developed it, could therefore be used to explore a range of social issues – in the past or present – which are relevant to, and illuminating for, the study of policy, popular culture and personal lives and their deeply entangled nature.



## **A note on previously published material**

This thesis includes extracts from previously published material that drew on my PhD research.

These publications, drawn upon and referenced in the text, and included as appendices are:

- Gambles, R. (2010a) 'Going Public? Articulations of the personal and political on *Mumsnet.com*', in Mahony, N., Newman, J., and Barnett, C. (eds.) *Rethinking the Public: Innovations in Research, Theory and Politics*, London: Sage (appendix five)
- Gambles, R. (2010b) 'Supernanny, Parenting and a Pedagogic State', *Citizenship Studies*, 14 (6) 697-709 (appendix six)

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## **Appendix one: research leaflet**

*Although the format was different, the following is the text of a research information leaflet I used in accessing parents to interview:*

**Are you a first time parent? Would you like to take part in research about your experiences of first time parenting? If so, I would like to hear from you...**

My research explores parents' experiences of first time parenting and the various joys, demands and pressures they may face. It focuses on parents own understandings of parenting and asks, amongst other things, whether Government policies offer the kinds of support parents feel they most want or need. As part of this research, I would very much like to hear about your experiences.

This would involve an interview that should take no more than one hour and 30 minutes. The interview can take place in your own home or another agreed place. Your identity and personal details will be treated confidentially and any reference to you or what you say will be completely anonymous. I hope the interview will be an interesting experience but if at any point you feel uncomfortable you will be free to stop. As well as having a chance to talk about your experiences, you will be given £25 of post office vouchers redeemable in a number of high street stores. These vouchers are offered in recognition of and thanks for the time you will spend speaking with me.

If you would like to take part in this research, please get in touch (my contact details are below). As I intend to interview a mix of different parents, it would be great if you would also answer the questions on the next two pages. You can either send these back to me via the post, via email or, if easier for you, we can go through your responses over the phone. If you would like to discuss the research in more detail before answering these questions, or before agreeing to take part, please contact me via email, phone or in writing.

Richenda Gambles, PhD student, Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University



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*Again, although the format was different, the text for the attached form parents were asked to fill out if there were interested in taking part was:*

As I want to speak with a mix of different parents, I would really appreciate it if you could answer the following questions returning these to me via post, or email (depending on whether you have a hard or soft copy of this form). Alternatively, if you would prefer, please feel free to call me and we can go through these questions over the telephone.

1. Are you a first time parent?	Yes / No
2. How old is your child?	_____
3. How old are you?	_____
4. What is your relationship to your child? Mother / Father / Other _____ (please specify)	
5. Are you currently in paid employment?	Yes / No
6. If so, what is your job?	_____
7. Are you taking, or have you taken maternity, paternity or parental leave?	Yes / No
8. Is your child regularly looked after by someone other than you?	Yes / No
9. If yes, who regularly looks after your child?	_____
10. Do you have a partner?	Yes / No
11. If so, do you live with your partner?	Yes / No / Not applicable
12. If you have a partner, are they in paid employment?	Yes / No / Not applicable

12. If applicable, what is their job? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Is your partner taking, or have they taken, maternity, paternity or parental leave? Yes / No

14. Please indicate the ethnic category below you feel best describes you:

White:	British
	Irish
	Other _____ (please specify)
Mixed Race:	White and Black Caribbean
	White and Black African
	White and Asian
	Other _____ (please specify)
Asian or British Asian:	Indian
	Pakistani
	Bangladeshi
	Other _____ (please specify)
Black or Black British:	Caribbean
	African
	Other _____ (please specify)
Chinese:	Chinese
Other:	_____ (please specify)

How would you like to be contacted? Email / Post / Telephone



Please give your name and preferred contact details:

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## **Appendix two: summary of interview participants**

Some details about the 23 parents I interviewed (names have been changed):

1. **Fiona:** she was 37 years old and a mother of a three year old girl. She worked part time as a civil servant. She was married to Peter, aged 38 years old. I did not interview him. Both Fiona and Peter were white British.
2. **David:** he was 29 years old and the father of a two year old boy. He worked full time as a journalist. Both David and Ellie, his partner, who I did not interview, were white British.
3. **Naja:** she was 27 years old and a mother of a two year old boy. She was not in paid work but doing voluntary work at the local children's centre. She was married to David. I did not interview him. Both Naja and David were Ugandan.
4. **Rachel:** she was 20 years old and a mother to a 10 month old girl. She was not in paid work. Rachel was a lone mother. She was white British.
5. **Sarah:** she was 21 years old and was a mother of a 20 month old girl. She was not in paid work. She was living with Nathan (see below). She was white British.
6. **Nathan:** partner to Sarah and father of their 20 month old girl. He was 21 years old. He worked for the council. He was white British.
7. **Jolanta:** she was 30 years old and mother to a 17 month old boy. She was not in paid work but on an English language course. She was married to Albin (see below). She is Polish.
8. **Albin:** partner to Jolanta. He was 34 years old and father of their 17 month old son. He was a car engineer. He was Armenian.
9. **Samantha:** she was 35 years old and mother of a 20 month old girl. She worked part time as a legal secretary. She was married to Gerry (see below). She was white British.
10. **Gerry:** partner to Samantha. He was 37 years old and father to their 20 month old girl. He worked full time as a graphic designer, though when I first made initial contact with them he had been made redundant and was out of work. He was white British.



11. **Amy:** she was 37 years old and mother to a 20 month old son. She did freelance editorial work which she described as “very part time” and mainly described herself as a stay at home mother. She was married to Paul (see below). She was white British.
12. **Paul:** partner to Amy. He was 38 years old and father to their 20 month old son. He worked full time as a computer scientist. He was white British.
13. **Debbie:** she was 31 years old and mother to twin boys aged 18 months old. She worked part time as a physiotherapist. She was married to Ben (see below). She was white British.
14. **Ben:** partner to Debbie. He was 31 years old and father to their twin boys aged 18 months. He worked full time as a social worker but he was training to be a vicar. He was white British.
15. **Jessica:** she was 30 years old and mother of a 17 month old son. She was not in paid work. She was married to Harry, a self-employed lawyer. I did not interview him. She was white British.
16. **Sylvia:** she was 39 years old and mother of a two year old boy. She was not in paid work. She was married to Richard, a sales and marketing manager. I did not interview him. She was white British.
17. **Rafia:** she was 30 years old and mother of a two year old girl. She was not in paid work but did voluntary work at the local children’s centre. She was married to Mahad (see below). She was Pakistani.
18. **Mahad:** partner to Rafia. He was 30 years old and father of their two year old daughter. He worked as a car engineer. He was Pakistani.
19. **Natasha:** she was 23 years old and mother of a 10 month old girl. She was not in paid work. Natasha was a lone mother. She was white British.
20. **Tina:** she was 23 years old and mother of a two year old girl. She worked part time as a nursery nurse. Tina was a lone mother. She was white British.

21. **Sandra:** she was 37 years old and a mother to a nine month old girl. She was about to return to part time work as a hairdresser. Her partner, Alan, was a carpenter. I did not interview him. She was white British.
22. **Alison:** she was 38 years old mother and a mother to an 18 month old daughter and expecting her second. She works part time for a health magazine. She was married to Ross (see below). She was white British.
23. **Ross:** partner to Alison. He was 34 years old and father to their 18 month old daughter and expecting their second. He worked full time as a PR manager. He was white British.



**Appendix three: consent form**

*The text of the form was as follows:*

I (print name) \_\_\_\_\_ agree to take part in this research project.

This interview will be about my expectations, understandings and experiences of first time parenting. It will focus on the joys, demands and pressures I encounter and will ask, amongst other things, whether I feel sufficiently supported as a first time parent.

I understand that recordings and written records of this interview will only be available to the researcher and the research supervisors. I also understand that information given in this interview may be quoted in research reports, but that my name and other identifiable information will be changed.

I can stop the interview at any time. I am also entitled to withdraw from this research at any point up until 30<sup>th</sup> March 2009. To withdraw, a letter will be written to:

Richenda Gambles, Department of Social Policy,  
  
Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University,  
  
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

If I withdraw from the research, all recordings and written records of my interview will be destroyed.

Richenda Gambles

If I want to talk to someone else about the project I can contact:

Associate Dean (Research),

Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University,

Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix four: interview schedule**

### *Reflecting back to when they were expecting*

- How did you feel once you found out you were going to become a parent?
- What were you expecting parenting to be like?
- What were your hopes?
- What fears or anxieties did you have?

### *Getting at their lived experiences of parenting and how this fitted with previous expectations*

- Once your child was born, how did things work out?
- As you expected? Totally different? Ask them to elaborate...
- What, for you, are the biggest joys of having a child?
- What do you worry about most?
- Talk me through a typical day...

### *On good parenting (understandings and experiences of child rearing and development)*

- What, to you, is a 'good' parent? Ask them to elaborate...
- Where have your ideas about 'good' parenting come from? (Friends? Family? Books, magazines? Websites? Watching particular TV programmes? Doctors / midwives?)
- Were there times when some people's ideas about 'good' parenting differed from others or from your own? If so, how did you feel about that? And how did you handle this?
- What are your hopes for your child?

### *Teasing out 'hard-working families' discourses*

- What responsibilities do you think you have as a parent?
- Is being in paid work one of them? Are you in paid work?
- If not, why not? (Can't find work / feel it is more important to be with your child?)

- If so you are, how do you feel about that? And who cares for your child when you are at work? Are you happy with these arrangements?
- If you are in a relationship, how do you and your partner share responsibilities for looking after your child? How does this work? And are you happy with this?
- Do you think parenting, itself, is hard work? If so, in what kinds of ways? Can you give me some examples?
- Do you, as a parent, feel supported in your role? What more support would you like? And from whom?

*To end:*

- Are there aspects or experiences of parenting that you think are important that we have not covered?



## Appendix five

Gambles, R. (2010) 'Going Public? Articulations of the personal and political on *Mumsnet.com*', in Mahony, N., Newman, J., and Barnett, C. (eds.) *Rethinking the Public: Innovations in Research, Theory and Politics*, London: Sage

The growth of interactive online communication is often associated with an opening up and extending of communicative options and possibilities and a key aspect or example of this is the sort of communication which focuses on topics of a personal or intimate nature. In this kind of communication, people are encouraged and enabled to go public with personal feelings or experiences and this, in turn, can tap into, shape and potentially transform public understanding and debate. This optimistic reading suggests that interactive online communication has the power to enable personal feelings, concerns and experiences to become more publicly known, recognised and taken up in public and political contexts. Yet it is worth reflecting on what of the personal might be closed off in relation to the public or political, or how the personal and political might be re-articulated in these processes in more troubling kinds of ways. I consider this here with reference to *Mumsnet.com*, an interactive parenting website which has exploded in fame and popularity in the UK in recent years. I reflect upon what is made public through *Mumsnet* and consider, in the process: how it might highlight or work to produce new articulations of the personal and political; and what might be at stake through these new articulations.

In exploring *Mumsnet*, I draw on the work of Shani Orgad (2005) who has looked at interactive websites for people experiencing breast cancer. Orgad argued that interactive websites which focus on the discussion of deeply personal issues offer important spaces to 'go public' with personal feelings and experiences. Yet, she suggests, such sites encourage people to rely on personalised and privatised strategies for making sense of and working through their experiences, rather than encouraging them to speak to or call up the public-political realm. In reflecting on *Mumsnet*, I argue that dynamics between the public, political, personal and private are rather more blurred and

shaping of each other than Orgad's analysis would suggest. With attention to this blurring and mutual constitution, I consider how the personal and political is articulated on *Mumsnet* and think about how this relates more generally to the public, political and personal of contemporary understandings and experiences of parenting.

### ***Mumsnet* and its public, political and personal significance**

I first became aware of *Mumsnet* in the context of my PhD research which focused on the first few years of first time parenting in the UK. This research considered the ways in which parental understandings are experienced through, shaped by and shaping of contemporary policy discourses as well as popular cultural representations of parenting. I chose to focus on the first few years of first time parenting because it is a site, moment or experience of personal, public and political significance. Becoming a parent, particularly for the first time, is a moment, for example, of profound personal change and transition (Wetherell, 1995; Thompson and Kehily, 2008), and yet this personal change and transition occurs in the context of much contemporary political and public attention relating to parenting. This suggests personal experiences and political or public discourses are likely to be mutually constitutive of each other (Lewis and Fink, 2004).

In relation to Government, parenting has become a site of intense interest and intervention (see also Jupp, this volume). This has been evident through extensive policy activity relating to parenting including the development of parental leaves, parental rights to request flexible working, affordable child care and Sure Start initiatives, and the extension of midwife and health visitor services (Home Office, 1998; DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007). The development of policies and initiatives focusing on parenting has been attributed to a range of factors. These include a concern to better support parents in the bringing up their children and to encourage or, if necessary, to coerce parents to take up certain economic and moral responsibilities in relation to their parenting (see Featherstone, 2004; Gillies, 2005, 2007; MacLeod, 2004; Williams, 2005). This focus – seen by New Labour as essential for the well-being of children and wider society more generally – can be linked to what



Furedi (2002) has called 'parental determinism' in which good or bad parenting is seen as the key determinant in the behaviour and development of children.

Parenting, including the first few years of parenting, is also, of course, the subject of much public discussion as seen in the UK news media as well as other forms of popular culture such as parenting books, magazines, television programmes and websites (Hardyment, 2007; MacLeod, 2004). This suggests that the media and popular culture contribute extensively to the mediation – but also production and transformation – of norms and expectations relating to parenting as well as what might be viewed as appropriate forms of public-political action. Parents get a lot of their knowledge of policy initiatives as well as ideas about parenting, more generally, from the media. Politicians, in turn, get much of their knowledge and understanding about parenting experiences from the media and popular culture, as well as evoking the media itself to justify new policy developments and initiatives. Beverley Hughes MP, then UK Minister for Children, Young People and Families made reference, for example, to *Supernanny* in a speech about parenting: 'Government too must extend the opportunities for parents to develop their expertise; the popularity of *Supernanny* exemplifies the hunger for information and for effective parenting programmes that parents often express to me' (Beverley Hughes, MP, keynote speech, IPPR, July 2006, cited in Gill and Jensen, 2008); and Harriet Harman MP, then UK Minister for Women and Equality, indicated her intention to create a website for parents to debate issues they want politicians to notice, which 'would be modelled on the success of Mumsnet, the website with topics ranging from nanny problems to breastfeeding techniques' (Observer, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2006).

My research draws on three distinct data sources: selected New Labour policy documents relating to the first few years of parenting; interviews with first time parents; and media and popular cultural representations including parenting manuals, the television show *Supernanny*, contemporary 'chick-lit' novels relating to parenting, and the interactive parenting website *Mumsnet.com*. Through my analysis of these different data sources, I worked to a) locate something of a contemporary mood or

sensibility relating to contemporary understandings and experiences of becoming and being a parent, and b) to make more visible the ways in which the personal, political and public are shaping of each other in the formation of these sensibilities.

My use of governmental sources, popular culture and personal narratives reflected my use of Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach (Williams, 1961; 1977). Structure of feeling is a concept that seeks to capture a 'mood, sensibility or atmosphere associated with a specific period or generation' (Lewis and Fink, 2004: 58). It refers to the 'actual living sense of a culture' where 'official consciousness of a period, as codified in legislation and doctrine, interacts with the lived experiences of that period, and defines the set of perceptions and values common to a generation' (Macey, 2000: 366). For Williams, structure of feeling is both a theoretical concept but also a methodological approach in which legislation or policy can be read alongside popular cultural texts so as to get a nuanced and dynamic reading of a mood or sensibility of a period (Williams, 1961: 70). Williams coined and developed the concept – and its associated approach – to explore and locate something of a cultural essence associated with a particular period or issue which, he argues is 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests' yet something which 'operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity' (Williams, 1961: 64). In this context, I argue that this structure of feeling approach invites attention to and can be used to explore and develop a more nuanced reading of public and political sentiments by recognising and reflecting on the ways in which these can emerge from, and feed into, personal and privatised feelings, dispositions and experiences.

*Mumsnet* is a particularly rich data source because it is both a popular cultural representation of parenting and, through the ability for people to participate and interact, a space through which to explore personal narratives, strategies and negotiations associated with becoming and being a parent. But another key reason for focusing on *Mumsnet* is because during the period of my research it had become a personal space for me due to my (troubled) experiences of becoming a parent. In the year prior to writing this chapter I experienced three miscarriages and, through my



familiarity with *Mumsnet* in the context of my PhD, I became personally involved in interactive discussions in the context of venting and dealing with my disappointment and grief. Whilst writing this chapter, I wondered whether it would be seen as appropriate to include discussion of my own troubled experiences of becoming a parent and my subsequent engagements with *Mumsnet*. Perhaps it was too personal and private for discussion in an academic – and by implication a public and political – genre in which the personal of the researcher is often (but, of course, and as seen in many chapters in this book, not always) under discussed or even swept aside? Yet *Mumsnet*, for me, has been a particularly personal public and my personal use of the site has shaped and influenced the way I explore and understand it. Indeed, it is the very combination of my personal engagements with *Mumsnet*, alongside my interest in and commitment to a feminist politics emphasising the connectivity of the personal and political, that has sharpened my attention to the concerns I raise in this chapter: that of the importance of considering the connectedness between the public, political, personal and private as well as what might be at stake, politically and personally, through the opening, recognising, or failure to recognise, such connections. Because of my personal engagements with *Mumsnet* and my emotions and feelings relating to my experience of miscarriage, it also became apparent that I had begun to somewhat re-inflect Williams’ structure of feeling concept. When Williams’ wrote of a structure of feeling he was talking about a collective mood or feeling of a generation or period. While I use this meaning, I also explore feelings at a more personal and emotional level and so explore further the ways in which a public mood or set of sentiments is also one that penetrates and is shaped by more personal or intimate feelings and dispositions.

### ***Mumsnet* as a personal public**

*Mumsnet* is an interactive website best known for its talk boards where parents or parents-to-be (or more accurately mothers and mothers-to-be) meet and discuss a whole range of experiences of interest and concern to them. What is immediately obvious from browsing through the *Mumsnet* site and its talk boards are the many different aspects and challenges associated with parenting.

Articles and posts on all manner of topics are covered from advice and suggestions about baby names, condolences and support for people who have suffered miscarriages, still-births or problems conceiving, and tips and discussions about how best to tackle child development and behavioural issues ranging from breast-feeding to potty training or children's interaction with other children. There are also multiple posts about child care and when or whether to go back to paid employment following the arrival of a child, posts on siblings relationships and reviews of products and paraphernalia that claim to aid in the raising of children. *Mumsnet*, I argue, can thus be regarded as a personal public in two distinct but overlapping ways.

Firstly, *Mumsnet* can be viewed as a personal public because of the processes of participation it enables and encourages. As an open access website, it is very accessible, can be read by anyone who has access to the Internet; becoming a member and contributing to discussions is a quick and easy process. *Mumsnet* has several thousand members – in 2007 an interview with one of *Mumsnet* founders, Justine Roberts, noted that Mumsnet had 60000 members and was receiving 250000 hits a month (Telegraph, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2007) – and can be seen as a dialogic space in which people get together and share knowledge, understandings and challenges relating to being or becoming a parent. Orgad has suggested that this type of interactive online communication can offer a positive, transformative experience in which the sharing of personal narratives can enable personal experiences to become publicly visible, rather than just a private set of feelings or experiences (Orgad, 2005: 12). In making this claim, she draws attention to the process of online communication in which participants can publish their accounts in 'a direct, straightforward and simple way...with minimal (if any) editorial intervention' (p. 15). This means that users have control of what gets depicted and the tone of these depictions which generates an articulation of "real" and diverse experiences in a publicly accessible forum. Orgad also notes that unlike much of the mass media, where 'multiple experiences are commonly bundled into one representative figure...the online space can accommodate multiple stories and voices' (2005: 18). This suggests that the processes of



online interactive communication have the capacity to make public the wealth and diversity of what might otherwise be regarded as personal or private experiences.

Secondly, *Mumsnet* can be seen as a personal public because of the public and personal significance of the *content* to which it speaks, in this case of being or becoming a parent. The subheading or strap line on the website is 'by parents, for parents' and a central orientation of *Mumsnet* is that parents are the real experts because of their own personal experience of parenting. This is demonstrated clearly through the title a book compiled by *Mumsnet* founders, *Mums on Babies: Trade Secrets from the Real Experts* (Foster et al, 2003), which is described as the first in a series of *Mumsnet* guides to parenting and features selected extracts from *Mumsnet* discussions. The book claims to offer 'a vast archive of expertise – collected the hard way – by thousands of real parents' (Foster et al, 2003: x). The emergence of this online forum, and its spin-off books, can be seen as a site through which parents can meet, chat and swap stories and advice where parents can support, learn from, negotiate and make sense of their parenting experiences in interaction with each other. In doing so, *Mumsnet* emphasises the importance of lay expertise or knowledge in relation to parenting. This is seen as being of particular importance in a context of conflicting and competing advice and information. *Mumsnet* is thus portrayed as offering a place for parents to sound off to and learn from each other and gain personal support and advice. This is seen as all the more necessary in 'our increasingly atomised modern western world' (ibid, x), where mothers do not always have a friend or relative to hand. Indeed, they suggest that,

Whatever the parenting poser you are facing, the chances are that one of *Mumsnet*'s members will have been there already. Their advice is offered in a rather different tone of voice to the tablets of stone delivered by the parenting gurus: not so much 'do this because it's the right way' as 'this worked for me, maybe it could work for you'. (Foster et al, 2003: x)

This suggests the positive potential of online communication – both in terms of its process as well as its content – in that experiences of parenting can be discussed, shared and debated in interaction with others through *Mumsnet* as a personal public forum.

### ***Mumsnet* as a personal and political public**

But as well as being a personal public, I also argue that *Mumsnet* is a *political* public, not least because of the activities generated by the website. *Mumsnet* is presented as an identifiable community who ‘swing into formidable and effective action should any member need help’ (Times Online, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2008). Examples given in the newspaper article making this claim include Mumsnetters rallying round to find a replacement doll for a mother whose child was inconsolable without it, to support for people suffering domestic abuse, losing their children to cot death, and mothers experiencing post natal depression. Indeed, people make personal use of the site to deal with and talk through the day to day joys, dilemmas and challenges associated with parenting. So in this sense, *Mumsnet* can be seen as a public which is motivational (Warner, 2002) and thus political in a personal-political sense. But is *Mumsnet* political in a way that works with but also moves beyond the personal? I want to explore this question in two ways: firstly in terms of the ways it links with formal politics; and secondly in terms of public mobilisations.


In terms of formal politics, *Mumsnet* is often visited by politicians who seek to communicate directly with parents about their contemporary parenting experiences. Indeed, in visiting *Mumsnet* and engaging with Mumsnetters in live web chat forums, politicians position themselves as seeking to learn from ‘real’ parents about the experiences and conflicts they face. They also – as I mentioned above – use their awareness of and their own discussions on the website to develop or justify policy positions and developments relating to parenting. This can be seen in live web chats with people such as David Cameron MP, Alan Johnson MP and Harriet Harman MP that are flagged up and accessible to all (not just *Mumsnet* members) via a link on Mumsnet’s home page.



In relation to the growth of the talk show phenomenon, but with observations that could be extended to other emergent forms of media, Ros Gill (2007: 167) has suggested that the media can be seen to be 'taking on new roles: they are acting as spokespersons for people to talk back to government and elites; they are offering forums in which politicians can be held directly accountable to the public (for example, when they appear on audience discussion programmes and are questioned about what they are going to do about any particular issue); and they represent a social space for communication amongst the public itself'. This, she suggests, can be attributed to the broader shift from an authoritarian model of discourse to a more populist and democratic style in which 'ordinary' voices are increasingly made use of in public discussions (ibid; see also Newman and Clarke, 2009). This could be argued similarly and even more powerfully for interactive websites such as *Mumsnet* where participants have much more direct control due to a lack of editorial intervention.

In terms of public mobilisations, *Mumsnet* can also be regarded as a political public as it develops and engages in campaigns about various issues or challenges relating to parenting and one example of this is a 2008 campaign relating to people experiencing miscarriage. From extensive online discussions amongst people that had experienced miscarriages, Carrie Longton, a *Mumsnet* founder, began a campaign for more sensitive treatment from health care professionals. She began this by posting the following:

By carriemumsnet on Mon 21-Apr-08 17:40:14 (MNHQ)

When Alan Johnson came a visiting last week, miscarriage and some of the frankly appalling treatment that Mumsnetters have suffered  was one of the talking points

Following on from sfx's comments (and others) this is what AJ had to say: "it seems to me from all your comments and from talking to the Mumsnet people here that we really should seek to ensure a common set of standards across the country. I think I'm in at the start of a new campaign and it's something I will talk to Ministers about when I return to

the Department. Mumsnet have informed me that I will not be allowed to forget this issue!" So now it's down to us to come up with that common set of standards- guidelines and procedures that we'd like to see implemented across the whole of the UK. I'll happily kick off as a veteran of 2 m/c: but do feel free to disagree with my suggestions/add your improvements :

Automatic access to EPU for anyone with a suspected miscarriage (without having to get a GP referral) and EPU's situated away from regular ante natal clinics /labour wards and devoid of images of smiling babies - please.

Access to all affected to a pamphlet/booklet put together by Mumsnet and full of your tips, advice, empathy and reassurance - describing what might happen and letting folks know they're not alone in this.

Over to you...

(Mumsnet, miscarriage section, accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008)

Through online interactive discussion, 10 recommendations were subsequently developed and compiled in a Code of Practice which was then featured in The Times newspaper (Times Online, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2008). This demonstrates the ways in which a public and political campaign was *mobilised* by personal disclosures through online interaction amongst *Mumsnet* members and their online discussions with a politician.

*Mumsnet* campaigning work is not confined to the issue of miscarriage. It also includes discussion about and involvement in more well known issues facing parents seen, for example, through a campaign called *Home Front: making like work*, a debate jointly hosted by *Mumsnet* and *Dads Info*, and supported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Through this, more awareness of the difficulties and challenges facing parents as they seek to organise paid work and caring for children is sought and *Mumsnet HQ* (the name given to the office of its founders and other paid members of staff) clearly states its aims of 'compiling policy suggestions based on your opinions about what's



needed to improve parents' work-life balance' (Mumsnet.com, Home Page, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008).

In these ways, it is possible to see how personal experiences are being publicly articulated in ways that tap into and seek to shape the public-political agenda. In her analysis of interactive online communication amongst people with breast cancer, Orgad found this lacking. She argued, drawing on the work of Warner (2002), that this was, in part, because the women she studied failed to recognise themselves as a public 'because they think of their authenticity and their femininity as rooted in necessarily private feelings and domestic (and thus invisible and peripheral) relations' (Orgad, 2005: 33). In this context, she asked whether interactive websites of this nature could 'constitute more than anonymous therapeutic spaces providing resources for confession, inwardness and self-elaboration?' (Orgad, 2005: 34). In the case of *Mumsnet*, it seems, perhaps, that it can; furthermore *Mumsnet* could be seen to offer something of a feminist public (although not stating or claiming its feminist status) in which it is possible for the personal to be personal *and* political in more public-political ways.

### ***Mumsnet* as a personal, political but also privatising public?**

It is important to consider, however, how *Mumsnet* might simultaneously promote more personalised *and privatised* strategies, rather than personalised *and politicised* strategies, for dealing with the parenting challenges and experiences that it discusses and evokes. This invites attention to the political and personal 'risks' such sites can engender.

As suggested by Orgad, *Mumsnet* does appear to encourage and enable personal disclosure in a way that promotes self-responsibility through an emphasis on personal empowerment and the therapeutic. I am very aware of this through my own personal involvement in the site in the context of miscarriage. In the posting about and sharing details of my own experiences, as well as responding to others in a similar situation, I have found comfort, support and strength to deal with

my own grief and the ability to support others in theirs. The tone or feel of these threads has definitely been one in which people are encouraged to 'go public' with their personal feelings and emotions, albeit in an anonymous and privatised way, which works with and encourages the development of personal strength to keep going in terms of trying to become a parent. Indeed, in these discussions, the personal is so often the focus and much less emphasis is given, for example, to the development or dissemination of the *Mumsnet* Code of Practice relating to miscarriage which I highlighted above.

*Mumsnet* could be said to work with the 'personal is political' feminist mantra and ethos, in which people are encouraged to talk about the intimate, private and everyday in a way that develops understanding and political awareness and recognition for personal experiences. Yet, this appears to co-exist with a tendency that Gill (2007: 177) has discussed in which the political is personalised with a reframing of 'every issue in individualistic terms and erasing any sense of the social or political' (see also Gorton, 2007). In the context of interactive online communication, these risks are a central critique made by Orgad in relation to breast cancer websites: that because users mainly discuss the individual and the personal, this encourages self-responsibility for dealing with and overcoming issues and problems they encounter (Orgad, 2005: 28). This self-responsibility often comes in the form of the encouragement and articulation of a therapeutic, self-empowerment approach which, Orgad argues, somewhat separates rather than integrates problems and concerns from the public-political realm (ibid, 32). Her reading of this is that such sites, whilst offering a supportive place to 'make public' private and personal experiences, also have a tendency to re-privatise the very issues they speak of.

This can be seen in relation to *Mumsnet* in terms of miscarriage experiences as well as many other sets of parenting issues discussed on the site. Taking, for example, one of the most popular talk sections of the site labelled 'Behaviour and Development', the threads place much emphasis on the personal reflexive and educative capacities and dispositions expected from and encouraged by and



of parents. These personalised capacities and dispositions are seen as key for enabling them to be or become 'good' parents who develop and nurture their children into 'happy', 'successful' and 'fulfilled' individuals. This focus, while important, somewhat eclipses discussion of the socio-economic opportunities and constraints that characterise the lives of different parents and their children. This offers an example of a personalised *and somewhat privatised* empowerment strategy rather than a personalised *and political* one.

This analysis resonates, in part, with claims made by Ouellette and Hay (2008) in their discussion of reality TV shows such as *Supernanny* as well as Gillies (2007) argument that New Labour policies focus on parenting skills rather than socio-economic redistributive strategies. Moreover, it works with observations made by Gorton (2007: 335) in relation to the fate of the second wave feminist mantra of the personal being political in which 'the personal and its healing became the solution to problems that were largely collective and social'. These processes can be seen, too, in relation to tensions many mothers discuss on *Mumsnet* and elsewhere about, for example, whether or not or to what extent they should be active in paid work or be present to care for and nurture their child. This is, of course, a publicly political and politicised issue. But a policy discourse of choice is one that plays up personal choice strategies and eclipses and privatises socio-economic or deeply gendered contexts in which such 'choices' are made (Ben-Galim and Gambles, 2008; Lewis and Campbell, 2007; Williams, 2005).

These examples begin, then, to highlight and suggest that the encouragement and articulation of a therapeutic, self-empowerment, deliberative choice approach is *not* as separate from the public-political realm as Orgad has suggested. Rather it may be reflective and productive of a public-political that *actively* works to personalise and privatise social experiences and processes into individual ones through what Nikolas Rose (1999: xx; xxiv) has referred to as the 'therapeutic' culture of the self. Rose's suggestion, here, is that people learn to monitor, supervise and take care of themselves through their own actions, dispositions and choices which is a way or condition of

being that is encouraged by and 'perfectly suited to neo-liberal democracies where discourses of structural inequality of power difference are fast disappearing and individuals are exhorted to live their lives through notions of autonomy, self-reinvention and limitless choice' (Gill, 2007: 171).

This can be seen through the *type* of voice encouraged on *Mumsnet*: one of a sharing and supportive nature which often works with and emphasises a therapeutic, empowerment, self-help-through-support-and-discussion approach. But as well as considering the type of voice encouraged, it is also important to consider *whose* voice is articulated in the context of exploring the personal and political of *Mumsnet*. Earlier, I mentioned claims that new forms of media, including interactive websites, are part of a shift from an authoritarian discourse to a more populist and democratic style. The claim for being democratic is made explicitly by Justine Roberts, one of the *Mumsnet* founders, in a newspaper interview when she claims 'it's modern, it's democratic' (quoted in Times Online, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2008). Yet while anyone, in theory, can log on and be a member, Roberts gives a description of the typical Mumsnetter as someone who 'might not be rich, but...probably is well educated', noting that 73 per cent of Mumsnetters are educated to a degree standard and 20 per cent have gone onto post graduate study (ibid). What is not, of course, stated here is that the typical Mumsnetter is also female and a mother or mother-to-be rather than a *parent* – something, of course, that somewhat disrupts and troubles the claim of the site to be 'by parents, for parents'. This suggests that *Mumsnet* constitutes and carries a particular voice, both in terms of the ways in which people speak but also in terms of who is speaking. This has implications for what – and whose – personal issues are taken up politically in the context of parenting and may link to the somewhat eclipsing and privatising of socio-economic and gendered constraints and other sets of issues that face some parents more than others. This invites further questions about whether publics that are personal and political and claim a 'democratic' status are politically representative of the diversity of people to which they – through their public, personal and political status – claim to speak (see Newman and Clarke, 2009; Davies et al, 2006).



## The personal and political of Mumsnet?

This chapter opened with questions of whether web based interactive new media could be seen as promising the recognition and take up of people's personal concerns and experiences into public and political contexts; or whether online communication might work to encourage personalised self-empowerment governance strategies that work to (re)privatise the issues spoken of and raised. Through a consideration of *Mumsnet*, I have highlighted how the very process and content of interactive online communication has the potential of opening up personalised and privatised issues or challenges into the public and political agenda. Yet I have also argued that narratives of optimism need to be treated with extreme caution. While the personal might be opened up to the public and political in new and potentially transformative ways it is important to think of *whose* personal this is, *how* the personal is re-articulated, and *what* might be marginalised or silenced in the process.

*Mumsnet* is a product of its time and both shapes and is shaped by a cultural sensibility, mood and voice relating to the expectations and hopes placed on and expected by parents today. This means that questions about what is at stake go further than a consideration of *Mumsnet*. They relate, too, to public and political discourses relating to parenting as well as personal negotiations of parenting that are agonised over by many parents today. I have argued that contemporary public and political action relating to parenting assumes and seeks to develop personalised strategies of learning, reflexivity and evaluation (see also Pykett, this volume). I have also suggested that the focus on personal empowerment can, in turn, work to (re)privatise parental responsibilities even whilst parenting remains such a public and politicised issue and concern. A structure of feeling approach has encouraged me to reflect upon these interconnections in the context of *Mumsnet* as well as parenting, more generally, because it assumes and works with the idea of the dialogic co-constitution of public and political sentiments with personal, intimate and *not-so-private* feelings and dispositions. By highlighting the interconnectedness and mutual constitution of the public, political and personal in relation to parenting, the idea and processes through which personal and

intimate experiences are deeply shaped by and shaping of the public and political can be kept open for much needed scrutiny and critical reflection.

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## Appendix six

Gambles, R. (2010) 'Supernanny, Parenting and a Pedagogic State', *Citizenship Studies*, 14 (6) 697-709

Abstract: This paper explores the messages and assumptions relating to parenting that are promoted through *Supernanny* and how this connects with the policy expectation or hope of New Labour – that parents should take responsibility for being skilled educators and developers of their children. In exploring these state and non-state governance discourses and what these suggest about contemporary ideals and expectations relating to parenting, I make use of Raymond Williams' structure of feeling approach and draw on this to develop the definition and reach of the idea of a pedagogical state. I argue that a pedagogical state can be seen as a state of mind or way of being that is produced through and producing of a particular sort of mood and set of sensibilities, in this case relating to contemporary understandings and experiences of parenting. In considering various viewer responses to *Supernanny*, some resistance to and scepticism of these discourses can, however, be detected. In this context, I further explore the idea of a pedagogical state as a disposition and mood relating to parenting which is disrupted – but also deepened – through people's evaluative reflexivity and (healthy) scepticism.

Key words: *Supernanny*, parenting skills, parental responsibility, New Labour, scepticism

Parenting, particularly the first few years of parenting, is a time of deep personal transition and significance with Wetherell arguing that 'to become a mother or father in whatever type of family context is to acquire a new set of experiences, a new set of relationships and a new sense of self' (1995: 215). These personal changes and transitions occur, however, in the context of much contemporary policy attention relating to parenting. Indeed, parenting, including the first few years of parenting, has become a site of intense Government intervention in the UK in recent years. This is evident through extensive policy activity such as the development of parental leaves, parental rights

to request flexible working, 'affordable' child care and Sure Start initiatives, and the extension of midwife and health visitor services (Home Office, 1998; DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007). This recent policy outpouring can be seen to promote two sets of expectations or hopes relating to parenting: the idea that parents have economic and moral responsibilities to be active in paid work so as to provide financially for themselves and their child as well as being a role model of their child; and the idea that parents will display particular parenting styles, approaches and skills deemed appropriate for the nurturance and development of their child (Featherstone, 2004; Gillies, 2005, 2007; Lister, 2006; MacLeod, 2004; Williams, 2005). These expectations – seen by New Labour as essential for the well-being of children and wider society more generally – can be linked, more generally, to what Furedi (2002) has called 'parental determinism' in which parenting is increasingly seen as the key determinant in the behaviour and development of children (see also Gillies, 2007). This idea of 'parental determinism' can be seen, too, in the range of popular cultural genres focused on and geared at parenting. Indeed, parenting is the subject of much contemporary public discussion in the UK news media as well as other forms of popular culture such as parenting books, magazines, websites and television shows (Hardyment, 2007; MacLeod, 2004). One such television show is *Supernanny*, a well known reality TV programme similar to *Little Angels*, *The House of Tiny Tearaways*, and *Nanny 911*, which focuses on the education and training of parents to enable them to deal more effectively with their children.

In this paper, I explore the messages and assumptions relating to parenting that are promoted through *Supernanny* and how these connect with the policy expectation or hope of New Labour – that parents should take responsibility for being skilled nurturers and developers of their children. In exploring these state and non-state governance discourses and what these suggest about contemporary ideals and expectations relating to parenting, I make use of Raymond Williams' (1961; 1977) structure of feeling approach. Structure of feeling is a concept and approach that seeks to capture a 'mood, sensibility or atmosphere associated with a specific period or generation' (Lewis and Fink, 2004: 58). It refers to the 'actual living sense of a culture' where 'official consciousness of a



period, as codified in legislation and doctrine, interacts with the lived experiences of that period, and defines the set of perceptions and values common to a generation' (Macey, 2000: 366). For Williams, structure of feeling is a theoretical concept *and* a methodological approach in which legislation or policy can be read alongside popular cultural texts so as to get a nuanced and dynamic reading of a mood or sensibility of a period (Williams, 1961: 70). This mood is one which contains multiple forces – dominant, residual and emergent – which jostle together to create a living and potentially moving structure of feeling. For Williams, the dominant is a 'lived system of meanings and values' and 'a sense of reality for most people in the society...beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move' (Williams, 1977: 110). Yet he argues that there will always be alternative movements and ideas – residual and emergent – within and beyond the dominant which may up this more nuanced and dynamic mood or sensibility.

*Supernanny* – and New Labour policy developments relating to parenting skills – can be said to constitute, in part, a mood or disposition relating to parenting in which the importance placed on parenting skills and practices in popular culture and policy is emphasised because particular pedagogical dispositions and behaviours of parents are seen as critical for child well-being and development. Yet as people respond to these ideas in a variety of ways, these ideas are subjected, in part, to challenge, resistance and potential change. Indeed, as Lewis and Fink (2004: 55) have suggested, while people are called upon to 'identify with, and make their own, a set of normalised and subject positions and practices of everyday living' that correspond with dominant ideas found within a structure of feeling, there are always alternative ideals and ways of being available and this highlights and opens up contestation (Lewis and Fink, 2004: 60). My interest in these dynamics has been informed by the idea that '...people are not just addressed or summoned by dominant discourses – but also "answer back"' in reflexive, critical and sometimes unexpected ways (Clarke et al, 2007: 142; see also Clarke, 2005). Indeed, while people are deeply influenced by and constituted through governance discourses of both state and non-state kinds, in offering varied responses, they are also active in the making and development of these governance discourses. How parents

respond to governance discourses and strategies, in this case of those found in *Supernanny* as well as certain New Labour texts, is thus a critical dimension to consider in the location of a structure of feeling relating to parenting.

In the research that this paper draws on, in which I sought to locate a contemporary structure of feeling relating to parenting, I made use of three distinct data sources. The first was selected New Labour policy documents relating to the first few years of parenting. The second was a selection of media and popular cultural representations geared at parents including parenting manuals, the interactive parenting website *Mumsnet.com*, and the reality television show *Supernanny*. The third was a collection of 23 interviews I carried out with a socially and economically diverse set of first time parents of children aged between nine months and three years who were recruited through various parent and child care networks in the Oxford area. Through the collection and analysis of these different data sources, I worked to a) capture something a mood or sensibility relating to contemporary understandings and experiences of becoming and being a parent, and b) make more visible the ways in which personal experiences and dispositions are shaped and shaping of cultural and political sensibilities.

In reflecting on these different data sources, I noticed that the focus, techniques and strategies that were encouraged in *Supernanny* – which link with New Labour policy – appeared to resonate, in part, with parents I interviewed who watched the show. Yet, parental resistances and scepticism could also be detected. In considering such responses to *Supernanny*, I develop my argument in this paper by suggesting that the idea of a pedagogical state can be seen as a particular sort of mood or disposition in relation to expectations of parenting that is disrupted – but also deepened – through parent's evaluative reflexivity and (healthy) scepticism. In developing this claim, I draw on examples of the *Supernanny* show with particular reference to three episodes from the 2005 series<sup>7</sup> alongside a recent book by *Supernanny*, Jo Frost, *Supernanny: How to Get the Best from your Children*,

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<sup>7</sup> These episodes were initially selected because of their availability though in subsequent work I am extending my analysis to a selection of episodes spanning the four UK series screened in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007



published in 2005. I consider these in relation to New Labour policy texts that take up similar issues and concerns raised in *Supernanny* programme, and extracts from some of my interviews in which parents talk about the show.

### Introducing *Supernanny*

The philosophy behind the TV show *Supernanny* is summed up by Jo Frost in her book as follows:

I don't think there's such a thing as a 'bad' child. I believe that every child has the potential to behave as expected. By that I don't mean Goody Two Shoes. I mean happy, relaxed children who have their own individual characters but who know where the limits are. Everything I've seen and experienced convinces me that children need boundaries. And to keep those boundaries in place, there needs to be discipline. Discipline is not about harsh punishment. A key part of it, in fact, is praise. But it does mean setting rules and backing up the rules with firm and fair control. (Frost, 2005: 11-12)

In this statement, Frost might say there is no such thing as 'a bad child' but her comments in her book and her TV programmes suggest there is such a thing as 'bad parenting'. The show, and her book, focus on changing this 'bad parenting' by encouraging parents to reflect on the problems they are facing in relation to their children's behaviour, to take responsibility – if necessary – for taking up *Supernanny's* 'tried-and-tested' rules and techniques for improving this, and to take responsibility for putting in the hard work necessary to achieve the promised results.

In considering the content and format of the show and the sentiments or sensibilities relating to parenting that are carried and created, at least two sets of ideas are suggested. The first is the idea that parents, themselves, often need to learn expertise about how to parent, that parenting does not always come 'naturally', but that parents should take personal responsibility for developing parenting skills and expertise with the help of experts like *Supernanny*. The second is the idea that

parents must work – if this hasn't come 'naturally' – to develop particular parenting strategies and approaches. The desire or hope for such parenting taps into a range of concerns relating to 'bad' parenting that is linked with widespread contemporary concerns about 'unruly' children and teenagers and their anti-social behaviour and the negative implications for these children as well as wider society more generally (see Butler and Margo, 2007).

*Learning to parent from Supernanny, the 'expert'*

*Supernanny* works to promote the idea that Jo Frost, as a particular sort of expert who has had years of experience as a nanny, can change and transform the lives of parents who are experiencing problems with their children. The presence of Frost and the 'success' of her approach as portrayed through the TV show supports and promotes the idea that parents can and should, if necessary, learn from experts.

The issue of expertise in relation to parenting is, however, a fraught one. This can be seen more generally, for example, in contemporary parenting manuals in which detached medical expertise is dismissed, in part, for an emphasis on 'real' or hands-on experience. Indeed in Gina Ford's bestselling *The New Contented Little Baby Book* (2002), Ford acknowledges that she is neither doctor nor psychologist and goes onto claim her own expert status *because of this*:

What is so different about my book is that it comes from years of hands-on experience. I have lived with and cared for hundreds of different babies. I offer real and practical advice on how to establish a good feeding and sleeping pattern from day one, thus avoiding months of sleepless nights, colic, feeding difficulties, and many of the other problems that the experts convince us are a normal part of parenting. (Ford, 2002: xii).

The emphasis on – and virtue made of – hands-on experience chimes, in part, with the idea that doctors and psychologists might be somewhat detached basing their claims on observation rather



than direct experience. Similar sentiments are offered, too, by Jo Frost in her *Supernanny* book in which she explains how her expertise has built up through working as a nanny for many years,

I'm not a parent. That's true. I'm not a paediatrician, either, or a child psychologist.

I've had no formal training to do what I do. Which puts me in much the same position as most parents, without the intense emotional attachment (although us nannies have feelings too!). (Frost, 2005: 11).

Here Frost positions herself as expert but in a way that is more aligned with parents: because of her lack of scientific training, she is 'in much the same position as most parents'.

This positioning corresponds with something of a backlash from parents about the role of distant and detached expert (see Foster, Longton and Roberts, 2003; Furedi, 2002). Frost (in both the TV programme but especially the book) acknowledges this mistrust and scepticism of experts, particularly if these 'experts' are not parents themselves, yet she also, simultaneously, has to work up her own claims of expertise in relation to parenting. Although she is not a parent she highlights years of 'real life' rather than formally developed expertise and – like many parents – has learnt through her 'own gut instincts' (Frost, 2005: 11). Yet she claims she has a less intense emotional attachment than parents which puts her in a better place to advise parents: 'when many parents find themselves in difficulties they're too emotionally involved to see the bigger picture' (Frost, 2005: 11). At the same time she is at pains to suggest she is not a completely detached and unfeeling person. Indeed, she suggests that, like other nannies, she has 'feelings too!'. These complicated sets of manoeuvres suggest the delicacy surrounding issues associated with expertise relating to parenting skills and practices which are seen, simultaneously, as private, personal and, as seen through the presence and popularity of shows such as *Supernanny*, also matters of much public concern.

The setting up of her own expertise in relation to parenting can be seen in the TV show in which Frost, after spending the first day observing the family in action, delivers her damning verdict. In one particular episode, for example, Frost's diagnosis of the problems is met with tears from the mother and nods of recognition from the father and Frost works to seek reassurance from the parents that her diagnosis is correct. Frost asks the mother, Caroline: 'Am I lying with what I am saying?'. Caroline, through her tears, replies: 'Not at all. You said everything that I would have said if I knew how, in the right way. You said it perfectly' (Supernanny, 2005b). With the thorny issues of Frost's diagnosis – and expertise – now acknowledged and confirmed, she returns the next day and gets to work with her 'tried and tested' routines and techniques. In her book, Frost describes these techniques as 'common-sense ways of dealing with the type of ordinary challenges and problems most parents of children under five face most days' (Frost, 2005: 10). She emphasises that she did not invent these techniques, but that,

By and large I've simply followed my instincts and observed parents and kids to see what worked and what didn't work. What I've called the 'Involvement Technique', for example, is just what many parents have done instinctively over the years when they have needed to get on with a household chore. The 'Naughty Step Technique' – a way of enforcing a rule by getting a child to think about their behaviour – has probably been around for as long as stairs have had steps and rooms have had corners. (Frost, 2005: 10)

In positioning herself as working with a set of common sense strategies for dealing with children, she works to hold up the idea that most parents already have this expertise but that some parents – including the ones she's working with on the show – need more intense instruction and support. For them, 'good' parenting does not, perhaps, come naturally or instinctively, yet the message of the show is that they have a responsibility to acknowledge this and work to develop such skills and attributes.



*The promise of Supernanny's 'tried-and-tested' parenting strategies and approaches*

The TV show features parents who learn, with the help of Supernanny, how to be 'better' parents to their children. With this in mind, the show typically begins with chaotic scenes of children running riot, having tantrums and being rude or disrespectful to their parents who, in turn, are portrayed as being at their wits end or close to breaking point. In these opening scenes viewers are told by a narrator of the particular problems facing the family that *Supernanny* will be working with in this particular episode. In episode one of series two, for example, we are introduced to a family in which children are 'out of control'. We are also introduced to the mother, Karen, who is depicted as being too soft on her children, and feeling drained and lacking in energy because of the chaos created through her softness. In contrast, father, Jason, takes a 'zero tolerance' approach in his parenting, shouting at and smacking the children when he gets home from work. We are thus told of relationship problems between the mother and father because of their disagreements about parenting styles and approaches (Supernanny, 2005a). Episode three of the same series starts in much the same way with viewers introduced to 'the youngest teenagers in town' who 'eat what they like, go to bed when they like and help themselves to everything. From using kitchen knives to hammering their dad's credit card, these kids are out of control!' (Supernanny, 2005b). After general scenes of mayhem illustrating these observations, and being introduced to the idea that the mother and father have different approaches to parenting, the narrator asks: 'Can Supernanny, Jo Frost, put the young Pandits [family name] in their place? Or will mum and dad's differences get in the way?' (Supernanny, 2005b).

Once the 'problems' are introduced and viewers have watched Frost observing a 'typical' day and set of events, in which she frequently turns to the camera to make disapproving comments about what she is witnessing, Frost offers her critiques which are always linked to a lack of discipline, respect and routine that the parents have failed to provide for their children. Once her diagnosis of the problems is confirmed, she returns the next day to get to work on introducing new rules and

techniques that she feels will transform the family's lives by restoring or creating happiness and harmony. This includes, for example, the Naughty Step Technique which works 'to remove the child from the scene for a few minutes' allowing them 'time to cool down, think about what [they've] done and get ready to apologise' (Frost, 2005: 80). In her book, Frost gives the following example:

Your jealous four year old has pushed his little sister and thrown a toy at her. She's fallen over and has started to wail. It's all going pear-shaped. You'll be furious; you might be worried and panicky too. Check first that your daughter is okay, resist the adrenalin surge that makes you want to yell at the top of your lungs and put the Naughty Step Technique into practice. (Frost, 2005: 80).

The idea, then, is for the parent to get the child to sit on the step until s/he's calmed down and said sorry, keeping them there until this happens and remembering to praise the child when this does. Another example is her Involvement Technique which works with the idea that small children want and need attention and that they like to feel part of things. She suggests that,

Small children don't find tasks like cleaning, sorting, fetching and carrying as boring as their older brothers and sisters sometimes do. Small children love to help. Helping makes them feel responsible and gives them confidence. (Frost, 2005: 77)

Through techniques stressing, for example, the importance of discipline and getting a child to reflect on their behaviour and say sorry, or the importance of involving a child so as to enable them to feel more responsible in life, we begin to see the use of a pedagogical set of strategies relating to parenting.

In the TV show, Frost works with the family for a few days to educate and support the parents in the deployment of her chosen techniques relating to her particular diagnosis. Although there are always teething problems of some sort, the chaos portrayed at the beginning of the show is soon replaced with calm, order and tranquillity. Through this, we see the confirmation of the effectiveness of her



pedagogical approach – on the children, but also, crucially, on the parents. Frost then leaves the family to see if the parents can manage on their own with Frost monitoring them remotely through video recordings which she accesses on her lap top. She observes the parents struggling in their attempts to execute the techniques she has introduced and the inevitable return of the chaos and disorder she sought to change. As she observes such scenes she makes her frustration very apparent and criticises the parents for failing to take up the strategies that she thinks will help them. Frost then returns to the house to ensure the parents *properly* apply her rules and techniques and that they understand exactly what they should be doing and why. Once this second round of technique training is over, she leaves having reinforced the power and importance of her approach to parenting. This brings the show to a close with images of a now happy (or happier) family coupled with reflections from the parents about the positive difference Frost has made to their lives. In episode one of series two father Jason says ‘I’ve always said you can’t teach parents how to be parents. I think this proves you can teach parents how to be parents’. Mother Karen agrees with him, demonstrating a now united front and a healed marital relationship, telling viewers ‘we’re giving them proper guidelines’ (Supernanny, 2005a). In episode four of the same series, the mother says ‘not everything is 100 per cent. You know we still have a few hurdles to cross. But we’ll carry on and we’ll try the best we can to make this work...we have to make this work because I’m not going back to that old life before’ (Supernanny, 2005c).

### ***Supernanny* and links with contemporary Governance strategies**

Working with a governmentality approach, Ouellette and Hay (2008a) argue that reality TV shows such as *Supernanny* are important examples of ‘social and cultural institutions that disseminate everyday techniques through which individuals and populations are expected to reflect upon, work on and organize their lives’ (p. 473; see also Lunt, 2008). Ouellette and Hay (2008a, 2008b) further argue that the emphasis on techniques and approaches that encourage reflexivity and transformational work on the self have emerged out of recent developments in welfare discourses.

Indeed they notes that in 'chronicling the details and challenges of lifestyles and the outcomes of ordinary people's choices and behaviour...[and by] aligning TV viewers with a proliferating supply of techniques for shaping and guiding themselves and their private associations with others, reality TV has become the quintessential technology of advanced or 'neo' liberal citizenship' (Ouellette and Hay, 2008b: 4). Such links can be seen clearly with *Supernanny* and recent New Labour policy discourses that stress the importance of 'good' parenting and the enactment of particular parenting skills and dispositions for realising this (see DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007). Indeed, as Dawn Butler MP, then Chair of the All Party Group on young people, and Margo have suggested: 'The single most important factor in the development and socialisation of young people is their immediate family. In this area policy needs to recognise the importance of hard factors – such as income, poverty and time off work – and softer factors – such as parenting skills and experience, support and advice' (Butler and Margo, 2007: 328).

An emphasis on the skilling of parents to be 'better', more 'skilled' and more 'effective' can be seen, for example, in the *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) document – an approach which is justified with reference to an 'evidence-based' or 'what works' framework. Indeed as Alan Johnson MP, then Secretary of State for Education, in the foreword to the *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) document states: 'Being a parent is – and should be – an intensely personal experience and parents can be effective in very different ways. However, we also have a growing understanding, evidenced from research, about the characteristics of effective parenting' (DfES, 2007: 1). This focus, as well as being 'evidenced from research' is further justified in Johnson's foreword through acknowledgement of the interest that parents, themselves, are showing in popular culture relating to parental skills and attributes: 'parents are demonstrating a growing appetite for discussion, information and advice, as we see from the increasingly vibrant market in television programmes, magazines and websites' (DfES, 2007: 1). And with direct reference to *Supernanny* in a speech about parenting, Beverley Hughes MP, then UK Minister for Children, Young People and Families suggested that 'Government too must extend the opportunities for parents to develop their expertise; the popularity of



Supernanny exemplifies the hunger for information and for effective parenting programmes that parents often express to me' (Beverley Hughes, MP, keynote speech, IPPR, July 2006, cited in Gill and Jensen, 2008).

It is perhaps no coincidence that reality TV shows, which emerged from the mid to late 1990s, correspond with the growth of third way discourses and an emphasis on the active and personally responsible citizen who will be supported and encouraged in their attempts to better themselves through an 'enabling' and 'empowering' state (see Giddens, 1998). Ouellette and Hay (2008b) argue that reality TV shows, including *Supernanny*, have taken up and regularised what they refer to as 'post-welfare' ideas of 'personal responsibility, and self-empowerment'. Yet a structure of feeling approach encourages attention, too, to the ways in which reality TV shows such as *Supernanny* have, themselves, also worked to shape, in part, these policy discourses and ideas. Indeed, the development of reality TV and a policy approach taking up ideas of personal empowerment and responsibility in relation to parenting skills can be seen as reflecting a particular sort of pedagogical mood that is mutually constituted by popular cultural and policy discourses in *dialogic interaction* (Holquist, 1990; Holland and Lave, 2001; Maybin, 2001).

The emphasis on personal responsibility to work with and learn, if necessary, particular forms of parental expertise that are produced through *Supernanny*, which can also be seen in contemporary Government discourses, demonstrates the ways in which popular culture and policy discourses work to promote a mood or set of sentiments about appropriate behaviour and an appropriate disposition assumed or hoped of parents if they are to be considered responsible. Through these pedagogical sentiments, parents are called and expected to enact or take up particular educative strategies and to critically consider, evaluate and transform, if necessary, their parenting styles to ensure they – and the children they raise – become the reflexively evaluative and self-transforming citizens desired in the here and now as well as the future (see Butler and Margo, 2007; Lister, 2006; Williams, 2005).

Through an emphasis on such pedagogical approaches and techniques, parents are encouraged and

empowered to work on their parenting styles and family relationships in ways that while difficult, promise positive and fulfilling outcomes (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a, 2008b).

The focus on techniques and skills and the personal capacity and responsibility for developing these, has been critiqued however for what it overlooks or silences. In particular, it silences difficulties (because of a lack of time, material or practical resources) or resistances (because of different cultural values and ideals associated with parenting) to taking up such ideas (Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005). In *Supernanny*, for example, the typical set of parents she works with are ones where there is a mother and father present and where the mother is often a stay at home mum or someone who works short part time hours (while the father, in contrast, works full time in paid work, often doing long hours). The techniques she introduces to the house need a lot of time and attention and this would not be possible without the constant presence of one of the parents (usually the mother). Moreover, on the television show, apart from *Supernanny*, there's never a nanny, granny, childminder or nursery featured giving the impression that it is just the parents (and mainly the mother) dealing with the behaviour and education of their young children. This emphasises the idea that mothers are – or should be – present with their children, working hard to educate and skill them which is, of course, one of New Labour's key policy hopes or expectations. Yet this focus silences or at least downplays tensions with New Labour's other key policy hope or expectation: the idea that parents (including mothers) can or should be active in paid work.

The show, rather than acknowledging or legitimising difficulties or resistances with *Supernanny's* focus on parenting skills, features parents who are complicit with her approach. This suggests that responsible parents, if shown how, will see the importance and benefit of learning and adopting this pedagogical style of parenting and that if they have been shown this, any subsequent problems or failures relating to their children or their parenting must, by implication, be the parents' own fault. Such critiques can be made of *Supernanny* as well as New Labour policy approaches that place particular emphasise on the development of parenting skills and the positive outcomes such skills



are associated with. Indeed, Gillies (2007) finds that recent New Labour policy has tended to take the form of guidance and education in relation to parenting rather than material help for parents. She suggests that such a focus, which can be seen in *Every Parent Matters* (DfES, 2007) and *The Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007), is 'part of a creeping professionalisation of family life' in which the idea that 'parenting can be distilled into a series of detachable, universally applicable skills' is emphasised at the expense of material factors and dimensions (Gillies, 2007: 7). Moreover, as Gillies argues, New Labour policy discourses of parenting skills can be seen to have a particularly gendered and classed address: it is not all parents but rather working class mothers who are targeted by policy initiatives such as those promoting parenting skills and training because 'working class mothering practices are held up as the antithesis of good parenting, largely through their association with poor outcomes for children' (Gillies, 2007: 2). Similar sentiments can be made, too, of reality TV parenting shows such as *Supernanny* which often feature working class or lower middle class parents in which these parents (particularly the mothers) are the subject of voyeuristic ridicule and, through *Supernanny*, are encouraged to change and develop their behaviour in line with more pedagogically orientated middle class approaches to parenting (see Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989).

### **Resistance and scepticism: viewer responses to *Supernanny***

Ouellette and Hay (2008b) argue that reality television teaches viewers to monitor, improve and transform themselves in ways that emphasise and promote personal responsibility but, like much governmentality scholarship, their assertion gives little attention to the various ways in which people – in this case parents as viewers – might respond. This oversight can be critiqued for its 'textual determinism' which assumes audiences uncritically absorb media (as well as policy) messages (Gill, 2007: 17; Clarke et al, 2007: 142). Such critiques have been informed by and have led to more consideration of the classed, gendered and / or racialised locations of viewer positionings which are seen as generating a variety of responses (see Gill, 2007: 17-18). This is an important set of observations. While it has been suggested that middle class norms and standards are promoted

through reality TV as well as through policy, resistances to such norms and standards as well as awareness that resources required to achieve these may be lacking have been noted (on these claims see Skeggs and Wood, 2008 in relation to reality TV; Gillies, 2007 in relation to New Labour parenting policy; and Gewirtz, 2001, in relation to New Labour education policy).

In my own interviews, I saw a variety of responses – a few of which I discuss here. The examples I offer are all from mothers, mainly because mothers had more to say about *Supernanny* than the fathers I spoke with. This supports the idea that the programme – and New Labour's emphasis on parenting skills – has a particularly gendered address. But what about class? In an interview I carried out with a young working class lone mother called Natasha, she appeared to enjoy and agree with the skills and strategies being promoted through *Supernanny*: 'She teaches how to do it right...I don't know, I seem to learn some things from there...It's really good for me. That's why I like to watch that programme'. Such a response suggests Natasha is responding in ways that Ouellette and Hay (2008b) suggest – that she appears to take up these messages and that she seeks to learn from them. In this context, the show – and the idea of parenting skills more generally – may have a classed address and this is taken up complicity by this working class mother. Skeggs, Thumin and Wood (2008) in their own research on audience responses of reality TV shows found, however, that the interview encounter was limited in terms of what it can reveal about working class responses to reality TV and through their own observation of working class viewer responses, resistance and scepticism towards the 'expert' was revealed. This resistance, they claimed, included verbal and non-verbal displays of disagreement over appropriate ways of parenting, but also resistance in terms of what is seen as possible in the context of their own material resources and the practicalities of their daily lives. Such resistance did emerge in another interview I carried out with Tina, another young working class lone mother who lives with her own parents, who spoke of the problems she encountered when she tried to adopt *Supernanny*'s bedtime routine: 'Well I tried to, but obviously living in the house with other people, when they've got to get up in the morning, they don't want to listen to a baby screaming. So I go to bed with her and she does go to sleep'. This example, alongside



claims made by Skeggs et al (2008), suggests classed resistance and scepticism about the potential and promise offered through *Supernanny's* (but also, perhaps, New Labour's) parenting strategies.

Scepticism can also be identified, however, when considering more middle class parental responses.

Alison, a more affluent mother I spoke with discussed this directly:

Richenda: So um...have you seen Supernanny?

Alison: Yeah, a little bit

Richenda: What do you think of that?

Alison: I think, um, I haven't watched her enough actually, I'd like to watch her more. Er, I'm very sceptical of TV experts, do you know what I mean? I just think they have to be a certain type of personality, I just know what they're doing, they think they're brilliant at it but I just think they're in for a, not, not, like a TV producer will chose someone for great charisma, not good advice...I mean I thoroughly enjoy them but just like I would watch *Wifeswap*, you know what I mean?

Richenda: So more entertainment factor than anything else?

Alison: Yeah, definitely.

This scepticism, as well as resistance, is evident in an interview I carried out with another middle class mother called Amy. Amy described Supernanny as 'awful' and was very scathing about an electronic naughty step she recently saw in a magazine: 'I mean talk about making punishment a game! The child's supposed to sit on there and I don't know, some little voice comes on and tells it when it can stand up or something...I was like, clearly all this is nonsense and we're going to have to develop our own methods'. So despite such shows focusing on parenting skills and approaches promoting what Skeggs and Wood (2008) refer to as middle class norms and standards relating to parenting, my interviews suggest middle class parents, themselves, are *also* deeply sceptical and

somewhat resistant to such ideas - and seemingly more willing to articulate this in an interview format.

In this context, why do so many parents – and non-parents – watch shows such as *Supernanny*? This question feeds into the idea of pleasure that is offered through the ‘spectacular entertainment’ value of such shows (Gill, 2007: 18; Gill and Jenson, 2008). Pleasure, seen in audience responses to such shows, has been argued to open up possibilities for personal affirmation and that in judging and scrutinising others, many viewers can take reassurance in relation to their own styles and techniques of parenting which, they conclude are not too ‘bad’ or at least not as ‘bad’ as those presented on the shows (Gill and Jenson, 2008). This sort of response can be seen in an interview I carried out with a working class mother called Sarah. She gets pleasure from *Supernanny* saying she finds it ‘hilarious’ because ‘some parents on there are so dappy’ and, for her, she finds reassurance in this: ‘you realise, well actually there are other parents out there who can’t cope. And we’re just normal, just normal’. But she also gets pleasurable reassurance from the show because in comparing the parents on screen with her own experiences as a parent she concludes that she, herself, does an okay job: ‘It’s so nice to; its sounds horrible, but you do compare yourself to them [laughs]. Actually, you know, we’re so much better than that’. The pleasure of judging others and, in the process, judging the self more favourably can also be seen in a response from a more middle class mother I spoke to called Samantha: ‘we did used to watch *Supernanny*, but that was more for an entertainment thing...it was just, again, shout at the telly and ‘my child’s never gonna do that [laughs]’. It is this pleasure-through-judging and the self reassurance it affords that might explain, in part, why so many parents – regardless of their class location – watch shows such as *Supernanny*.

This section has sought to highlight ways in which viewer responses to *Supernanny* are often ones of pleasure in which the judging and scrutinising of others works to offer people reassurance about themselves. Viewers can enjoy a reassurance that their own styles and techniques of parenting are not as “bad” as some others and in the process, they can construct and perceive themselves as more



enabled, empowered and responsible. Yet there is also suggestion of an awareness of the difficulties and / or resistances parents might have with taking up these ideas – because they go against their self-constructions of what constitutes good parenting, or the practicalities of daily life that might make the take up of these strategies more difficult. Just as critical commentators have argued that a focus or emphasis on the development of particular kinds of parenting skills as the main way of producing well-behaved and well-developed children is problematic, so parents, too, in all their diversity appear to share this sceptical view. Instead of taking up policy and popular cultural ideas relating to parenting in uncritical or unreflexive ways, the parents (particularly the mother) I spoke to appeared to reason through and evaluate these strategies in reflexive and sceptical ways. Such scepticism and evaluative reflexivity about the promise and potential of the development of parenting skills offers a more nuanced reading of the ways in which parents resist but – through the process of sceptical resistance – take up hopes and expectations for skilled, pedagogical and deeply reflexive parenting that are found in popular cultural and policy discourses.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The presence of parental resistances and scepticism might, through one reading, disrupt the idea of a pedagogical mood or state of mind relating to parenting. Yet, another reading is that the presence of resistance and / or scepticism further emphasises it. Indeed Pykett (this volume) argues that a pedagogical state is one which invites public scepticism and which promotes the capabilities of citizens to reflexively self govern which subsequently contains the conditions for its own challenge. This paper has shown that parents, themselves, regardless of their classed location, display critical and reflexive responses to messages relating to parenting skills. Their responses might not correspond directly with the hopes and expectations suggested in *Supernanny* – or indeed, recent New Labour policy discourses emphasising parenting skills; but the presence of scepticism and resistance to these messages demonstrates the fluidity, flux and instability of state and non-state governance ideas and strategies. Attention to these dynamics offers a deeper and more situated

reading of a structure of feeling relating to parenting in which parents are encouraged to display particular pedagogical attributes and skills. These pedagogical attributes and skills are seen as critical for the successful nurturance and development of their children – and this is a message which contains and carries a particularly gendered and classed address. As seen through my interview data, mothers respond, however, in ways that are not necessarily reducible to their class locations. Indeed most of the mothers, in their own ways, demonstrated resistance and scepticism of the techniques and approaches espoused by Supernanny. Through this, it is possible to see how parents demonstrate evaluative reflexivity and (healthy) scepticism which, while disrupting the idea of a pedagogical mood or sensibility, actually works to deepen it.

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